



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



TUESDAY — 8 FEB 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	02/07 Future of growth in Spokane County?
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/money/economy/boomtown-inland-northwest/spokane-county-future-growth/293-6859dcc0-bd63-40ef-8f16-c483fa61c9e1

GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — Washington state's Office of Financial Management projects Spokane County's population will exceed 600,000 people by 2040. That's a gain of about 90,000 people in the next 18 years.</p> <p>In anticipation of that growth, we've seen a lot of development throughout the county.</p> <p>Riverfront Park In 2018, Spokane's Riverfront Park began transforming into an event-based attraction downtown. Renovations are still underway, but we've already seen bright and colorful additions to the iconic U.S. Pavilion. The park now also features the Numerica Skate Ribbon--the first of its kind on the West Coast.</p> <p>Last summer, the Ice Age Floods Playground opened on the north bank of Riverfront Park. The recreational area is just one piece of the \$75 million-dollar revitalization project started by the City of Spokane's Parks and Recreation department.</p> <p>Kendall Yards Kendall Yards is one of Spokane's many up-and-coming trendy neighborhoods. It's home to new businesses and several seasonal events for the community.</p> <p>Wonder Building A few blocks east from here, renovations turned Spokane's historic Wonder Building into a market featuring several food and drink vendors, including High Tide Lobster Bar, which is about to get a new concept, and Evan's Brother's Coffee.</p> <p>North Monroe The North Monroe Corridor project gave the street a fresh new look. The multi-million-dollar project closed the North Monroe strip for five months. It reduced five lanes to three, widened sidewalks, and upgraded street lighting.</p> <p>University District In December 2018, the city officially opened the University District pedestrian and bicycle bridge. It crosses over the BNSF Railway corridor, connecting Spokane's East Sprague area to the University District.</p> <p>The Podium Construction on The Podium, Spokane's newest sports facility, was completed last fall. The \$53 million project will bring major sporting events to Spokane including the 2022 US Track and Field Indoor Championships in February.</p> <p>Downtown Stadium Adjacent to The Podium will be Spokane's new downtown stadium. The facility is intended to replace the 70-year-old Joe Albi Stadium. It will be home to Spokane Public Schools football and soccer games. And even bring a new professional soccer team to Spokane.</p> <p>Amazon expansion Amazon continues to expand its footprint in Spokane county. The West Plains fulfillment center opened in 2020. A second fulfillment center started operations in the Spokane Valley last fall. And the latest Amazon addition is Amazon Air at the Spokane International Airport.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/08 Hong Kong Covid misery deepens
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-leader-says-city-stick-with-dynamic-zero-covid-strategy-now-2022-02-08/
GIST	HONG KONG, Feb 8 (Reuters) - Hong Kong announced stringent new coronavirus restrictions and record new infections on Tuesday, while a shortage of vegetables added to the misery as truck drivers who tested positive for COVID-19 were unable to bring them from mainland China.

The Asian financial hub reported a record 625 coronavirus cases on Tuesday, with cases likely to continue rising rapidly, authorities said. There were 2,600 infections over the past two weeks compared with just two in December.

Responding to the worrying trend, Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam said public gatherings would be limited to two people from four currently, while churches and hair salons would close from Thursday, joining a slew of venues already closed.

Lam also announced a ban on private gatherings of more than two families, though it was unclear how authorities would enforce it.

"The time has come for Hong Kong to take some tough measures," Lam told a news briefing.

"We are adopting stringent measures to protect Hong Kong."

Hong Kong's supply of vegetables on Tuesday was around one-third of Monday's after several cross border truck drivers, who bring in produce from mainland China, tested positive, the government said.

Shelves stocking vegetables were bare across supermarkets in the city while crowds surged into fresh markets to snap up the limited produce available. Other food remained available.

At a market in the city's downtown Wan Chai district, a staff member from Qiandama vegetable store, shouted to crowds not to enter.

"No more veggies inside...It's like the battlefield," she said as people tried to charge in.

Some vegetable and fruit stalls selling mainland Chinese produce were shuttered while others were selling produce at double their usual prices.

For now, Lam said, the best option was to adhere to the "dynamic zero" strategy employed by mainland China to suppress all coronavirus outbreaks as soon as possible.

The official Chinese Communist Party newspaper, the People's Daily, had encouraged Hong Kong to follow China's approach to containing the virus in an editorial on Monday.

"When vaccination rates increase, when Omicron disappears and when other things happen, we will revisit our strategy," Lam said.

ISOLATED

Hong Kong's coronavirus policies have turned the Asian travel and business hub into one of the world's most isolated major cities.

The economic and psychological toll from the hardline approach are rapidly rising, with measures becoming more draconian than those first implemented at the start of the pandemic in 2020.

Flights are down by around 90%, schools, playgrounds, gyms as well as most other venues are shut. Restaurants close at 6 p.m. (1000 GMT), while most people, including the majority of civil servants, are working from home.

All the measures are being extended to Feb. 24, when the city's vaccine pass will also take effect. People will need to be vaccinated to enter shopping malls, supermarkets and other venues, Lam said.

Government quarantine facilities are also nearing their maximum as authorities struggle to keep up with their rigid contact tracing scheme.

	<p>Many health experts have said the current strategy of shutting itself off as the rest of the world shifts to living with coronavirus, is unsustainable. read more</p> <p>Doctors say mental health is suffering, particularly in families where people are earning less, or children cannot go to school due to the restrictions.</p> <p>Hunting the shops for vegetables, one 60 year old man, who gave his surname as Ngai, said the authorities should help supply more food as prices had surged.</p> <p>"The government doesn't do anything, so the vegetable sellers are upping the price," he said. "It's really hard to be a Hong Konger."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/08 Drillers get busy in costly shale basins
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/oil-nears-100-barrel-us-drillers-get-busy-costly-shale-basins-2022-02-08/
GIST	<p>DENVER, Feb 8 (Reuters) - As U.S. oil rises toward \$100 a barrel, producers in some high-cost shale basins are buying properties and adding rigs and frack crews in places that fell silent when prices crashed early in the pandemic two years ago.</p> <p>Benchmark U.S. prices last week topped \$93 a barrel, up around 65% in the last 52 weeks and the highest since 2014. U.S. producers are cranking up spending at double-digit rates as fuel demand has soared and fears have waned that OPEC will again punish them by flooding the market with crude that is cheaper to produce.</p> <p>Some executives say current high prices and relatively low service costs make production economics the best in years. Firms are buying U.S. oil, pipeline and gas processing rivals in a bet that higher prices will more than cover rising costs of labor and equipment.</p> <p>"Drilling economics today are better than they've ever been since the shale revolution started," said Chris Wright, chief executive officer of Liberty Oilfield Services (LBRT.N). Closely held companies, in particular, are accelerating output, he said.</p> <p>New activity is stirring in secondary oilfields like Colorado's DJ Basin, Wyoming's Powder River, Louisiana's Haynesville and North Dakota's Bakken shale, which last year lost its spot as the second largest U.S. oil producing region.</p> <p>ACQUISITIONS SPUR OUTPUT</p> <p>Spending budgets among U.S. independent producers are up 13% over a year ago, according to analysts at Cowen. Among secondary fields, the natural gas-rich Haynesville is among the only to fully recover output from the 2020 oil-price crash. Other shale fields, including the second-largest producing oilfield, are adding to holdings and rigs.</p> <p>"When you look at the oil prices in the Bakken, the prompt price is close to \$90 a barrel," said Bob Phillips, chief executive of energy pipeline company Crestwood Equity Partners. "That doesn't happen very often."</p> <p>Last week, Crestwood completed a \$1.8 billion deal to purchase Oasis Midstream Partners' oil, gas and gas-processing assets in North Dakota and Texas as part of a plan to become a top-three midstream operator in the Bakken, Powder River and Permian shale fields.</p> <p>Shale dealmaking that leads to more output could accelerate this year, said Andrew Dittmar, who specializes in merger and acquisitions for energy tech firm Enverus.</p>

"Most of the selling private companies are ones that bring inventory as well as production to the table," he said.

In Wyoming's Powder River oilfield, Continental Resources has made several acquisitions since last year, the latest from Chesapeake Energy. That purchase could revive the area's output, said Crestwood's Phillips.

Continental is scheduled to release its fourth-quarter results next week and has not yet highlighted its 2022 budget or plan, a spokesperson said.

U.S. oil futures are nearing \$100 a barrel, and last week traded above \$93 a barrel - the highest level since 2014.

PRICES BENEFIT ALL

Ben Dell, managing partner at energy investor Kimmeridge Management and interim CEO at Colorado's Civitas Resources, said every basin is enjoying an uplift from higher oil and gas prices.

"The DJ has been particularly profitable," he said. In fact, Dell thinks the prices may stir too much production, leading to oversupply.

In the Haynesville shale in East Texas and Louisiana, natural gas production is forecast to hit a record 14.1 billion cubic feet per day this month, according to U.S. government data.

Output gains are happening so fast production forecasts in some areas have proven too low. Data and analysis firm East Daley Capital had estimated Haynesville output would rise 12% this year based on 37 active rigs.

There are 42 now drilling, five more than it expected for the year. "There is further upside to our current forecast," said Rob Wilson, a vice president at East Daley.

ROOM TO RUN

Still, outside of Haynesville and the Permian, oilfields lag their peak production. Bakken producer Hess Corp. aims to increase its overall production by 12% to 15% this year, driven by output in the Bakken and Guyana. Chevron plans to boost its Permian shale output 10% and Exxon said it could deliver 25% more oil and gas from its Permian holdings.

In the Bakken, oil output is around 1.2 million barrels per day (bpd), below its 1.52 million bpd late 2019 peak. In the Eagle Ford shale of South Texas, oil is averaging 1.1 million bpd, off the peak 1.7 million bpd in early 2015.

U.S. producers have been adding three rigs per week, but they would need to add 11 rigs per week to hold production at current levels, according to Mizuho analysts.

Ron Ness, head of trade group North Dakota Petroleum Council, said supply chain challenges could limit production gains this year, as could investors demanding higher returns.

"Unless \$100 plus oil changes the investment mindset toward growth, I'm not sure we will see 1.5 million barrels per day again" in the Bakken, he said.

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HEADLINE	02/08 Mauritius presses claim on UK for islands
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-general-assembly-africa-united-kingdom-europe-indian-ocean-bb94b6227c552559c2c51d98b553d803

BANGKOK (AP) — A delegation from Mauritius is set to sail Tuesday to the Chagos Islands to press the country's claim for the strategically important Indian Ocean archipelago, which is also claimed by Britain and is home to an American military base.

It is the first time Mauritius has embarked upon an expedition to the islands without seeking the permission of the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth said in a statement, adding it is a "concrete step" in "exercising its sovereignty and sovereign rights in relation to the Chagos Archipelago."

Those rights were strengthened in 2019 by a non-binding opinion from the International Criminal Court, which said that Britain had unlawfully carved up Mauritius, an archipelago nation whose main island is some 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) off the southeast coast of Africa. The Chagos islands were a part of Mauritius until Britain separated them a few years before Mauritius became independent from British colonial rule in 1968.

The United Nations General Assembly followed that opinion with a resolution two months later demanding that Britain end its "colonial administration" of the Chagos Islands, which include the U.S. military base on Diego Garcia, and return them to Mauritius. Even Pope Francis weighed in, saying that Britain should obey the U.N. resolution.

Thus far, however, Britain, which calls the archipelago a "British Indian Ocean Territory," has refused to abide by the non-binding decisions. It has argued that the Chagos archipelago has been under its sovereignty since 1814 and that its continued presence there is strategically important.

Britain's Foreign Office did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the current expedition.

In his statement, Jugnauth recalled the ICJ ruling and said that "continued administration of the Chagos archipelago by the United Kingdom constituted a wrongful act." His office did not immediately respond to an email seeking further comment.

Jugnauth has repeatedly said that ending the British administration, however, would have no implications for the U.S. military base at Diego Garcia, which he has said Mauritius is committed to maintaining.

Britain sealed a deal in 1966 allowing the U.S. to use Diego Garcia for defense purposes. The United States maintains a base there for aircraft and ships and has backed Britain in the legal dispute with Mauritius.

Britain evicted about 2,000 people from the Chagos archipelago in the 1960s and 1970s so the U.S. military could build its base. Many resettled in Britain and have fought in courts there to return to the islands.

Jugnauth in 2019 told the U.N. General Assembly their forcible eviction "remains a very dark episode of human history akin to a crime against humanity."

Jugnauth said the vessel commissioned by Mauritius, Bleu de Nîmes, is to sail Tuesday from Seychelles to the Chagos archipelago, about 500 kilometers (310 miles) south of Maldives in the Indian Ocean.

Onboard for the 15-day journey is Mauritius' permanent representative to the U.N., as well as legal advisers and others who planned to undertake a scientific survey at the Blenheim Reef, a partially submerged atoll in the northeastern part of the archipelago.

Jugnauth said the survey results would be part of Mauritius' submissions for a case being heard by the Hamburg-based International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, which was brought by Maldives, which supports Britain's sovereignty claim.

Jugnauth said in his statement that he would not accompany others on the current voyage, but would personally visit the islands in a separate voyage.

HEADLINE	02/08 UN: 13M face severe hunger Horn of Africa
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/africa-droughts-united-nations-kenya-ethiopia-5a76209a2fc384d97d96a7fded2fb907
GIST	<p>KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Drought conditions have left an estimated 13 million people facing severe hunger in the Horn of Africa, according to the United Nations World Food Program.</p> <p>People in a region including Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya face the driest conditions recorded since 1981, the agency reported Tuesday, calling for immediate assistance to forestall a major humanitarian crisis.</p> <p>Drought conditions are affecting pastoral and farming communities across southern and south-eastern Ethiopia, south-eastern and northern Kenya, and south-central Somalia. Malnutrition rates are high in the region.</p> <p>WFP said it needs \$327 million to look after the urgent needs of 4.5 million people over the next six months and help communities become more resilient to extreme climate shocks.</p> <p>“Three consecutive failed rainy seasons have decimated crops and caused abnormally high livestock deaths,” it said in a statement. “Shortages of water and pasture are forcing families from their homes and leading to increased conflict between communities.”</p> <p>More forecasts of below-average rainfall threaten to worsen conditions in the coming months, it said.</p> <p>Others have raised alarm over a fragile region that also faces sporadic armed violence.</p> <p>The U.N. children’s agency said earlier in February that more than 6 million people in Ethiopia are expected to need urgent humanitarian aid by mid-March. In neighboring Somalia, more than 7 million people need urgent help, according to the Somali NGO Consortium.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/08 China locks down city of 1.4M amid surge
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-coronavirus-pandemic-sports-health-business-cf7d91b2e27ad904d3a73a33643032c5
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — China has ordered inhabitants of the southern city of Baise to stay home and suspended transportation links amid a surge in COVID-19 cases at least partly linked to the omicron variant.</p> <p>Classes have been suspended, non-essential businesses closed and mass testing of residents ordered. Restaurants are only permitted to serve take-out. Traffic lights have been switched to red only to remind drivers to stay home.</p> <p>As of Tuesday, 135 cases had been reported in the city — at least two of them found to be omicron, health authorities said.</p> <p>The city has become the latest to be placed under lockdown in keeping with China’s “zero-tolerance” approach to the pandemic. The policy requires strict measures be applied even when only a small number of cases have been found.</p> <p>A major concern is preventing outbreaks during the ongoing Beijing Winter Olympic Games. No new cases were reported in the Chinese capital on Tuesday.</p> <p>More than 30 athletes at the Beijing Olympics are in isolation facilities after testing positive for the coronavirus, organizers said Tuesday. The average stay in isolation is seven days.</p>

Baise has an urban population of about 1.4 million, with another 3 million in the large surrounding rural area that abuts the Vietnamese border.

State media reported customs clearance at the crossing points of Longbang and Pingmeng were delayed, causing further disruptions to cross-border trade that have already inflicted major losses on Vietnamese fruit farmers who rely on the Chinese market for much of their revenue.

The first cases in Baise were reported Saturday at the tail end of the Lunar New Year holiday, when many Chinese travel vast distances to their hometowns. For the third year running, [the government asked people to remain in place to avoid a major spread](#), although such calls had only a slight effect on the numbers of trips taken.

Despite the occasional regional outbreak, China has largely brought the pandemic under control through lockdowns, mass testing, case tracing, mask mandates and other strict measures. Almost 85% of the population is fully vaccinated, according to Our World in Data, although questions have been raised about the efficacy of Chinese vaccines, particularly against the omicron strain.

Chinese health authorities say the continuing emergence of outbreaks despite the high vaccination rate justifies the continued implementation of “zero-tolerance” policies and the quarantining of travelers arriving from abroad.

At the same time, lockdowns imposed in December and January on millions of residents of northern and central cities have been lifted.

China has reported a total of 106,524 cases of COVID-19, with 4,636 deaths. Currently, 1,473 people are in treatment for the disease.

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HEADLINE	02/08 Research: NKorea ICBM base near China
SOURCE	https://dnyuz.com/2022/02/08/north-korea-builds-icbm-base-near-china-as-fears-of-new-test-loom/
GIST	<p>SEOUL — North Korea began this year with a record-breaking spate of missile launches, but stopped short of a truly provocative step: ending its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile tests.</p> <p>Some experts say that next move could be just a matter of time.</p> <p>Kim Jong-un, the country’s leader, has already threatened to end the moratorium, saying at a party meeting in January that his country would consider “restarting all temporarily suspended activities” and switching to “more powerful physical means” to deter the United States. He has spent several months unveiling new weapon technology.</p> <p>And, according to new research, his military has been building a base strategically located for future ICBM launches.</p> <p>In a report published Monday, a team of analysts at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said they had located an underground, regiment-size military base used for housing North Korean ICBMs just 15 miles from the border with China.</p> <p>The location, the analysts say, was chosen to deter pre-emptive strikes from the United States against North Korea’s most important weapons as the country to continues to expand and modernize its arsenal.</p> <p>“As best as can be determined from satellite imagery, informed sources, and what little data is available, the base is ready to receive an operational ICBM unit,” said the report.</p>

In January alone, North Korea launched 11 missiles, including its [Hwasong-12 intermediate ballistic missile](#), prompting the United States to call for additional sanctions at the United Nations.

North Korea is not expected to do any new missile tests in February, possibly out of deference to its ally China, which is hosting the [Winter Olympics in Beijing this month](#). But observers fear the provocations will intensify once the Games are over and North Korea seeks to prod the Biden administration to resume stalled negotiations.

“North Korea will likely escalate pressure on the United States by taking a series of steps toward an ICBM test,” said Cheon Seong-whun, a former head of the Korea Institute for National Unification, a government-funded research institute in Seoul.

North Korea conducted its last ICBM test in November 2017, after which it claimed that its nuclear-tipped ICBM could strike any part of the continental United States. Should Mr. Kim launch an ICBM this year, it would most likely be from vehicles housed in a base such as Hoejung-ni, the facility identified in the report published on Monday.

Though it is unclear if Hoejung-ni is fully operational, most analysts believe a North Korean ICBM would be launched from a similarly concealed military installation.

Hoejung-ni is the second possible ICBM base in North Korea that CSIS analysts have identified. [Yusang-ni](#), a base 39 miles northeast of Pyongyang, the capital, was identified in 2019.

North Korea has long hidden its vital military assets in caves, underground bunkers and tunnels. But the country has spent recent years making it even harder for the United States and its allies to find and target its most dangerous weapons — by keeping them not only deep underground but also near the border with China.

“The position near the Chinese border acts as a potential deterrent to a pre-emptive strike that might impinge on Chinese security equities,” said Victor Cha, a senior vice president and North Korea expert at the CSIS.

The location also allows Pyongyang to keep its most prized weapons far from South Korea’s [stealth jets](#) and conventional missiles, the range and destructive power of which have increased in recent years to target the [underground facilities](#).

Building activities at Hoejung-ni and the nearby Yeongjeo-dong facility were [first reported](#) in 2018. But the new report claims to be the first to confirm Hoejung-ni as an ICBM base. The researchers also used new satellite imagery to provide updated details on entrances to the underground facilities, support buildings and hardened drive-through concrete shelters where missiles are armed and fueled.

“North Korea doesn’t have a strong air force or air defense system, so the best way for the country to protect its missiles is to conceal them in underground facilities,” said Shin Jong-woo, a senior analyst at the Korea Defense Security Forum in Seoul. “When it launches missiles, its launcher vehicles will spread out from these bases to their launching positions.”

North Korea began taking its military assets deep underground in 1962 after it suffered devastating losses from superior American air power during the 1950-53 Korean War. U.S. and South Korean officials estimate there are now 6,000 to 8,000 underground facilities in North Korea, enhancing the country’s ability to endure surprise attacks.

Some have been dug under the northern slopes of the rugged mountains facing China, making it harder for American and South Korean warplanes to target their entrances without provoking Beijing. During the Korean War, when the American-led United Nations forces pushed their way up the Korean Peninsula toward China, Mao Zedong sent troops streaming across the border to [turn the tide of the conflict](#).

South Korea said the North's Strategic Force command has added four regiments since 2018, for a total of 13. All four — including one based in Hoejung-ni — [were reported to be](#) located near the border with China.

The location of Pyongyang's nuclear missiles is among the most tightly guarded secrets within the North Korean military. In 2017, the Pentagon [told](#) Congress that the only way to "locate and destroy — with complete certainty — all components of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs" would be through a ground invasion.

Finding the underground facilities has been a key challenge for American and South Korean military planners for decades, because they are hard to spot by satellite. Some are built as decoys. Others may be hidden under ordinary houses.

"An underground facility in North Korea is so tightly guarded that soldiers who work there can have access to their assigned area only, so it's extremely hard to get a blueprint of the place," Maj. Park Sung-man, an officer at the South Korean Army's Special Warfare Command, said in a [paper](#) published in 2015.

What little data that is available on North Korea's weapons development can come from unexpected sources.

In April 2019, a pro-North Korean [website](#) boasted that nuclear missiles launched from train cars rolling out of tunnels — [like in the old Soviet Union](#) — would be another potent addition to the North's growing arsenal. In a first, the country launched two missiles from a train car last September and [another pair last month](#).

North Korea is crisscrossed with rail lines going through numerous tunnels that provide cover from spy satellites. While most of the country's rail lines are electric, its military railways run diesel locomotives.

The country recently switched from electricity to diesel engines to power the Haesan-Manpo railway, a 156-mile rail line that runs near the border with China, according to the pro-North Korean website. The Haesan-Manpo line goes straight through Hoejung-ni.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Officials warn 'back to normal' takes time
SOURCE	https://www.arcamax.com/currentnews/newsheadlines/s-2629414
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO — With the omicron surge fading fast and people clamoring for a return to pre-pandemic life, public health officials in California and beyond are facing new pressure to relax mask and vaccine safety rules.</p> <p>But many remain wary of declaring victory, aware that new variants are possible in the months ahead. Hopes for a definitive end to the pandemic have been dashed many times, they say, and it would be unwise to drop both masking and vaccine requirements when such uncertainty remains.</p> <p>Instead, health officials are urging smaller steps.</p> <p>"This phase of the pandemic is nearing its end. I think that's clear," University of California, San Francisco epidemiologist Dr. George Rutherford said at a campus meeting last week. "What variants emerge after that is really pretty much anyone's guess. ... There's just no predicting them, unfortunately."</p> <p>Some California counties are beginning to repeal vaccination mandates to enter certain businesses. Contra Costa County on Friday said it was lifting its vaccine-or-test requirement for customers of indoor restaurants, bars and gyms.</p>

Health officials in the Bay Area's third-most-populous county said the relaxation of the mandate, which has been in place since August, comes now that 80% of residents are fully vaccinated, and 2 in 5 residents have received a booster shot.

By contrast, in Los Angeles County, 69% of residents are fully vaccinated, and 1 in 3 residents have received a booster.

"We believe now is the right time to loosen a requirement that made a lot of sense last summer, when a different variant of COVID-19 was dominant and there was less community immunity," Dr. Ori Tzvieli, Contra Costa County's acting health officer, said in a statement.

"But by no means are we back to normal," Tzvieli said. "There are still many more cases of COVID-19 in our community now than there were in mid-December, so we need to continue to take precautions when we go out."

But other parts of the Bay Area are still enforcing their vaccination rules. Oakland became the latest city in California to require proof of full vaccination to enter certain businesses after an emergency ordinance approved days before Christmas went into effect Tuesday. A similar rule is in place in West Hollywood and Berkeley.

San Francisco, however, has tweaked some of its requirements. The city partially softened its vaccination verification rule Tuesday to allow indoor restaurants, bars, clubs, theaters and entertainment venues to permit unvaccinated customers to enter if they cite religious beliefs or a qualifying medical reason. But those people must show a recent negative coronavirus test — administered by a test provider and showing the person's name — to enter.

For vaccinated San Francisco customers, booster shots will now be required for entrance to certain locales for those who are eligible. San Jose made a similar adjustment Friday for indoor events of 50 or more people at city-owned sites, including the convention center and SAP Center, an indoor arena that's home to the San Jose Sharks.

San Francisco also eased its COVID-19 mask order for vaccinated gym members and office workers, allowing them to shed face coverings as long as they are up to date on their vaccinations and booster shots, if eligible.

The Bay Area has been spared from the worst of the omicron surge likely because of higher vaccination and booster rates and greater compliance with mask-wearing.

Since New Year's Day, there have been 42 COVID-19 deaths in Contra Costa County, about four deaths for every 100,000 residents. L.A. County's death rate is four times worse — with 1,576 deaths since Jan. 1, or about 16 deaths for every 100,000 residents.

L.A. County is also challenged by a higher poverty rate and overcrowded housing, which have always made it more vulnerable during the pandemic than the Bay Area. Among the 25 biggest metropolitan areas in America, L.A. has the highest percentage of overcrowded homes, according to 2019 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Among all L.A. homes, 11% are considered overcrowded, compared with about 6% in New York and the Bay Area.

L.A. County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said there are still valid reasons behind the county order requiring vaccinations for customers of indoor bars, wineries, breweries, nightclubs and lounges, as well as the city ordinance mandating proof of full vaccination to enter indoor restaurants, shopping centers, movie theaters, hair and nail salons, coffee shops, gyms, museums, bowling alleys, performance venues and other spaces.

"We still have a lot of cases here, and we have a lot of transmission. And anything we can do to really help us get to a lower level of transmission, I think, is appropriate," Ferrer said.

Unvaccinated people can still enter city businesses by voicing a religious exemption, but they need to show proof of a recent negative coronavirus test. Opponents are gathering signatures to either force the City Council to rescind the rules or put the issue on the ballot for voters to decide.

L.A. County has outlined criteria by which it would drop mask requirements in certain outdoor settings once COVID-19 hospitalizations drop, and in which indoor mask rules would be loosened after further gains.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger has advocated for lifting the mask order. “Individuals should be allowed to make an informed choice about whether to mask up or not,” Barger wrote.

Supervisor Holly Mitchell, however, has supported the policy, noting it helps reduce rates of transmission.

“COVID-19 transmissions, quite frankly, disproportionately impact the everyday workers who make up the backbone of this very local economy,” said Mitchell, whose district has many Black and Latino residents who have suffered far worse health outcomes during the pandemic. “They are disproportionately brown and Black workers who must go to their jobs every day and interact with people every day.”

A new study by scientists at UC Berkeley and the California Department of Public Health further illustrated the effectiveness of masks in preventing coronavirus infection. Published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the study found that always wearing a mask in indoor settings resulted in being less likely to test positive for the coronavirus compared with those who didn’t routinely wear masks.

People who wore N95 or KN95 masks in public indoor settings had 83% lower odds of testing positive; those who wore surgical masks had 66% lower odds; and those who wore cloth masks had 56% lower odds.

A number of doctors speaking at a campus discussion at UC San Francisco called for caution about shedding masks too quickly and warned there’s still a lot of uncertainty about what variants might emerge.

“March seems soon to me to take away masks. I think we need to see more time to understand what’s going to happen,” Dr. Sarah Doernberg, associate professor of infectious diseases at UC San Francisco, said. “It feels a little premature to take that away.”

Rutherford, who is also a board-certified pediatrician, cautioned against removing mask mandates in classrooms and daycare centers too quickly. For children age 2 to 4, for whom there is no licensed vaccine, masks remain the best layer of protection, he said. An outbreak could cause a day care center to close for perhaps 10 days.

For elementary, middle and high school students, who have had a chance to be vaccinated and, in some cases, boosted, “as transmission drops, we can back away,” Rutherford said. But dropping masks too quickly and potentially seeing a rise in outbreaks could result in large numbers of students being sent home for many days, and “I think that that’s a much greater disrupter of education than having masks on,” he said.

It’s also important to consider children who have underlying health issues and who could benefit from extended mask mandates. “There are lots of situations in which you might want to add an extra layer of protection. But I think, compared to keep sending everybody home every time there’s a case, masks are a much less intrusive kind of intervention,” Rutherford said.

Low vaccination rates among children are also a concern, experts caution. In San Francisco, 73% of children 5 to 11 years old are vaccinated with at least one dose, but in L.A. County, only 32% of children in the same age group are.

	<p>People will have to make personal decisions about whether to shed masks. With California's mask order set to expire Feb. 15, counties that don't have their own mask order — such as Orange, San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino — are likely to see their mask mandates end unless the statewide mandate is extended.</p> <p>UC San Francisco infectious diseases expert Dr. Peter Chin-Hong said he likely would continue wearing a mask in the near future in crowded indoor settings, such as at Costco. He's also conscious about the possibility that, having received his booster in October, that his antibodies will again wane to the point that he may be more vulnerable to a breakthrough infection, although he's confident about being protected against severe illness.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Study: 7-in-10 living paycheck to paycheck
SOURCE	https://www.studyfinds.org/living-paycheck-to-paycheck/
GIST	<p>NEW YORK — In these tough financial times, a new study finds it's getting harder and harder for people to save any of their money. In fact, seven in 10 Americans say they're living paycheck to paycheck.</p> <p>A recent survey of 2,007 adults found that 63 percent don't see themselves reaching a level of financial security that will allow them to live the lifestyle they want.</p> <p>Lack of financial education and resources may be to blame, particularly for women, who were less likely to say they had access to these tools in comparison to men (65% vs. 84%).</p> <p>What does financial comfort really look like? To educate themselves en route to financial comfort, most turn to social media (45%), their family (44%), or online media such as financial news websites (42%).</p> <p>Conducted on November 22, 2021 by OnePoll on behalf of AmeriLife, the survey also explored the necessities for financial peace of mind among different groups.</p> <p>While most women noted an absence of credit card debt (59%) as the most important requirement for financial comfort, the majority of men think it's homeownership (58%).</p> <p>Saving is key to financial stability Respondents also differed in what they consider to be essential for financial wellness. Seventy-nine percent of Americans earning over \$150,000 found a savings account to be "very" important, compared to just 54 percent of those with an income of \$60,000 to \$89,999.</p> <p>On average, respondents feel they'd need \$686 of disposable income per month to feel financially comfortable.</p> <p>When it comes to retirement, the average American plans to start thinking about it at age 40. However, seven in 10 confess their understanding of personal financial comfort kept changing after they reached adulthood.</p> <p>"Things don't always go according to plan; no matter your income, having a budget is key," says Denny Southern, president of annuities and retirement planning for AmeriLife, in a statement. "If possible, a person should have six months of expenses readily available in savings. Once they achieve this, they can then target 30 percent of their income for things they want, and the remaining 20 percent for their savings. The earlier a person can do this, the further it will take them towards a comfortable retirement."</p> <p>Overcoming financial hurdles Seventy-six percent of millennials are likely to say that at some point in their adult life, a personal healthcare-related bill caused them to spend a large chunk of their savings. They also noted that keeping</p>

up with healthcare-related bills has derailed them from making other payments (70%), more so than any other age group.

For most of the millennial respondents, that sacrifice came in the form of a down payment or mortgage on a home (57% and 56%).

Regardless of age, the vast majority of Americans (82%) believe that financial comfort is important to their [mental and emotional well-being](#).

“It’s important to know how to offset costs of both planned and unforeseen events,” adds Frank Tebyani, president of career agency distribution for AmeriLife. “It’s not surprising to note, however and unfortunately, that only three in 10 respondents use financial advisors as a resource to educate themselves to attain financial comfort.”

ESSENTIALS FOR FINANCIAL COMFORT:

- No [credit card debt](#) (57%)
- Good [credit score](#) (54%)
- [Homeownership](#) (53%)
- Residual/ancillary income (52%)
- Savings account/rainy day fund (52%)
- [Being able to retire](#) (51%)

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HEADLINE	02/07 US intel: Russia officers have doubts
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/07/politics/us-intel-russia-doubts-invasion-ukraine/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) Intercepted communications obtained by the US have revealed that some Russian officials have worried that a large-scale invasion of Ukraine would be costlier and more difficult than Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Kremlin leaders realize, according to four people familiar with the intelligence.</p> <p>Three of the sources said those officials include intelligence and military operatives.</p> <p>The officials have also grumbled about their plans being discovered and exposed publicly by western nations, two of the sources said, citing the intercepted communications.</p> <p>There is no evidence that these officials are opposed to the overall plan, or would revolt against Putin's orders, two of the sources said. Another source familiar with the US intelligence noted that Russia has a professional military that would be expected to effectively carry out Putin's orders.</p> <p>Still, Russian defense personnel believe it will be difficult, a senior European official said. "In the assessments we see it is clear some people on the [Russian] defense side are not really understanding what the game plan is," the official said. The official added that the assessments suggest the defense personnel think "it's a very difficult game plan to stand up."</p> <p>Another of the sources familiar with the intelligence said that the way the Russian planning has evolved and expanded over the last two months suggests that the concerns have been heard by senior Russian officials.</p> <p>Officials told CNN on Saturday that Putin has now assembled 70% of the military personnel and weapons on Ukraine's borders that he would need for a full-scale invasion of the country. Some assessments indicate that he may be planning to try to take Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, they said, and the city could fall within 48 hours of a large-scale land and air invasion.</p> <p>Another possibility, the officials said, is that Putin decides upon a multi-pronged operation, sending in forces from several directions across Ukraine to quickly fracture the Ukrainian military's ability to fight as a cohesive force -- a classic Russian military strategy.</p>

"We've long said that Putin continues to add to his options and capabilities, and we've been equally transparent about some of the moves we believe he intends to make to justify some sort of military action," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby told CNN Monday. "We're also going to continue to help Ukraine better defend itself with both lethal and non-lethal assistance."

US officials publicly and privately say they still don't know whether Putin has decided to attack, and what form it would take if he did. That is largely because the US' visibility into Putin and his inner circle is still extremely limited, the sources told CNN.

The US has fairly solid insights into the Russian military and foreign ministry, the sources familiar with the intelligence told CNN. Many of those personnel have been involved in the current buildup near Ukraine, which has afforded the US better-than-usual visibility into Russian planning. But the US intelligence community is still largely cut off from Putin and the most senior Russian officials, who are themselves typically isolated from the lower-level operatives carrying out Kremlin orders.

Even so, many of the preparations have been overt and easier to spot. Russia has continued to build up its forces near Ukraine's borders, including more advanced deployments in Belarus and Crimea, according to satellite images taken by Maxar Technologies and [provided to CNN](#). New housing and personnel camps have sprung up in the last two weeks, the images show. And the US has seen indications that Russia had begun erecting supply lines such as medical units and fuel that could sustain a drawn-out conflict should Moscow choose to invade, officials have previously told CNN.

"Given the type of forces that are arrayed ... if that was unleashed on Ukraine, it would be significant, very significant, and it would result in a significant amount of casualties," Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley told reporters last week. "You can imagine what that might look like in dense urban areas, along roads, and so on and so forth. It would be horrific. It would be terrible. And it's not necessary. And we think a diplomatic outcome is the way to go here."

Another US official assessed that the diplomatic path is narrower than ever, however. "We are in Hail Mary territory," he said.

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HEADLINE	02/08 Russia's next move depends on weather?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/08/europe/ukraine-russia-weather-climate-intl/index.html
GIST	<p>Mariupol, Ukraine (CNN)Even in the 21st century, warfare is affected by weather -- and that may become a factor in any Russian offensive into Ukraine. The question on the lips of Ukrainians, and maybe Russian generals: "Has Rasputitsa come early?"</p> <p>Rasputitsa is the term for the mud of spring, when travel in Russia and Ukraine by road becomes more difficult. Usually its impact is most felt in March, as the snows begin to melt.</p> <p>So far, this winter has been unseasonably mild in much of Ukraine. As CNN drove from the eastern port city of Mariupol to Zaporizhzhia in central Ukraine on February 1, it began to rain. The driver shrugged in disbelief. "Should be snow," he laughed.</p> <p>In Zaporizhzhia, crusted banks of snow were melting into a trickle of brown water. Even at midnight, as a shroud of mist lay over the River Dnieper, the temperature hovered at freezing. Sleet turned to drizzle and back again.</p> <p>Military analysts are debating whether a continuation of the mild winter might affect any plans for an offensive. The Kremlin has repeatedly denied it has any intent to attack Ukraine, but more than 100,000 Russian troops are gathered close to the borders of Ukraine, along with heavy weapons, tanks and ballistic missiles.</p>

Social media videos from several areas where Russian forces are deployed -- some posted by soldiers themselves -- show soft and flooded ground, and plenty of mud.

Data from Copernicus, the EU's Earth Observation program, shows that much of eastern Europe experienced well-above-average temperatures in January. Ukraine saw temperatures between 1 to 3 degrees Celsius higher than the average of the past 30 years, one of many changes that the climate crisis has brought this region.

Copernicus also notes that in January, "eastern Europe was predominantly wetter than average" and the soil in Ukraine was wetter than normal. The combination means less frost and more mud.

That's no surprise to Svitlana Krakovska, head of the Applied Climatology Laboratory at the Ukrainian Hydrometeorological Institute in Kyiv.

"What we're seeing on a long-term trajectory is a lower number of days with snow cover as well as frost nights. We definitely see much stronger warming happening here than the global average," she told CNN.

The US assessment is that a Russian incursion would be easier if the temperature falls.

"[Russian President Vladimir Putin] is going to have to wait a little bit until the ground is frozen so he can cross," US President Joe Biden said at a news conference last month.

At a Pentagon briefing at the end of January, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, said that when Ukraine's "high water table" freezes, "it makes it for optimal conditions for cross-country tract and wheeled vehicle maneuver."

US officials have said Putin would understand that he needs to move by the end of March.

But Dara Massicot, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, says that "while frozen ground would be a 'nice to have' for Russian forces, it's not a determining factor. It's important to keep in mind that precision-guided missiles and airstrikes are not influenced by this factor."

Russian forces have substantially improved over the last decade, says Massicot. The air force has acquired better targeting and communications -- and many of its pilots have gained combat experience in Syria.

"The Russian military trains year-round so they have experience with different weather conditions."

Russian tanks -- hundreds of which now sit within reach of Ukraine's border -- are not much impeded by soft ground, though they'd likely make quicker progress over frozen ground.

Even so, armor moves only as fast as its logistical tail, vehicles that could be slowed by bad weather "if they had to go off-road for some reason," says Massicot. She notes that Russia has forward-deployed logistical equipment to help overcome such problems, including recovery vehicles and bridging materials.

Pontoon bridges have also been observed on rail convoys traveling into Belarus since late January.

Ground conditions would matter more in some places than others. Eastern Ukraine is rolling farmland, ideal tank country. But the northern border with Belarus includes thousands of square miles of bog and marsh that would impede an attacking force (as it did the Nazis in 1941 during Operation Barbarossa.)

According to the Institute for the Study of War, "The marshes can be difficult, in some places likely impossible, for mechanized forces to traverse when wet."

Much depends on the sort and scale of military operation that Russia might have in mind. In the early stages of a conflict, air and missile attacks would be more important than a surge of mechanized units.

"The skies would not be a factor for Russian precision guided cruise or ballistic missiles, or even some of their more accurate long-range artillery systems," says Massicot, who was formerly a senior analyst at the Pentagon on the Russian military. "Cloud cover is especially not a factor for fixed locations like military facilities or command and control where coordinates are known."

Russia has moved a substantial number of Iskander ballistic missiles, which have a range of about 300 miles (450 kms) close to Ukraine in the last month.

In the east, Ukrainian frontline positions have not moved for years; missiles and long-range artillery could target them regardless of weather -- perhaps providing a breakthrough point for Russian armor.

Attack aircraft, which would be tasked with attacking Ukrainian units on the move, would need relatively clear skies. So would planes for dropping air assault troops into the conflict zone; according to defense analysts Janes, "multiple airborne forces (VDV) units have also been identified deploying into Belarus."

A low cloud-base hinders air operations as well as satellite reconnaissance, and might blunt Russia's considerable air superiority, making for what one military analyst called "a fairer fight."

But it's a double-edge sword. Dense cloud (and night) cover would allow the Russians to move troops forward to start-lines without being detected from above. Should the Kremlin decide to attack, a period of bad weather followed by clear skies once operations are underway would be optimal.

The skies would matter to the Ukrainians too. If they opted for a highly maneuverable defense, they would require airborne intelligence provided by the US and NATO to focus limited resources on key points to blunt the Russian advance.

Of course, weather conditions are not the only -- nor the major - consideration for the Kremlin. The progress (or lack thereof) of negotiations on Russia's published demands sent to the US and NATO will likely be the decisive factor. Devising some justification -- a casus belli -- for going to war would provide important messaging for a skeptical Russian public. Shaping the information war is a key part of Russian strategy.

A changing climate

Krakovska, an author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report published last year, says there is a clear connection between climate change and Ukraine's changing winters.

That's particularly pronounced in Eastern Ukraine, where winter temperatures are around 3 degrees Celsius warmer on average than they were in the 1960s.

"Thirty years ago, we would have had snow cover, especially in [eastern Ukraine], for at least three months of the cold season, and we'd have frost nights for around five months," Kralovska said.

"In 2020, we didn't really have a winter at all, just a few days were under zero, and we didn't have much snow, just a little."

Russian President Vladimir Putin used to be ambivalent about global warming. Back in 2003, he even said that "Maybe climate change is not so bad in such a cold country as ours? 2-3 degrees wouldn't hurt."

More recently he has acknowledged the damage it is doing to Russia's environment.

Now it might affect his generals' calculations.

The winter weather in Ukraine can be fickle, but the outlook for the rest of February in Kyiv is milder than the average, local meteorologists say, with most daytime temperatures well above freezing and the very occasional splash of sunshine.

	Timko, Ukraine's very own groundhog, apparently thinks the Rasputitsa mud may be a little earlier this year. He didn't see his shadow when he emerged from hibernation last week.
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HEADLINE	02/07 CDC highest travel risk 135 places
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/cdc-very-high-risk-travel-destinations-february-7/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) — The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention added even more destinations on Monday to its ever-growing list of places considered to be a "very high" travel risk for Covid-19.</p> <p>Level 4, the CDC's highest, has now swelled to almost 135 places, illustrating the rapid surge of the Omicron variant around the world. In early January, there were around 80 destinations listed there. Level 4 now has more destinations than all the other CDC categories combined.</p> <p>Joining the Level 4 ranks this week are two island nations on opposite sides of the world: Japan in Asia and Cuba, the largest and most populous island in the Caribbean.</p> <p>The other new Level 4 nations are also scattered around various parts of the globe.</p> <p>Armenia is in the mountainous Caucasus region on the far reaches of eastern Europe. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is in the heart of Central Africa while Libya is on the Mediterranean coast of northern Africa. Oman is on the Arabian Peninsula, while Israel is on the Mediterranean shores in the Middle East.</p> <p>The CDC places a destination at Level 4 when more than 500 cases per 100,000 residents are registered in the past 28 days. The CDC advises travelers to avoid travel to Level 4 countries.</p> <p>To recap, this week's additions to Level 4 are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Armenia • Cuba • Democratic Republic of the Congo • Israel • Japan • Libya • Oman <p>Last week, the Democratic Republic of the Congo was at "moderate" Level 2. Armenia, Cuba, Japan, Libya and Oman had been at Level 3, in the "high" risk category.</p> <p>Israel was added to Level 4 on January 18 along with 21 other destinations and remained there in subsequent updates. However, the CDC listed Israel as an updated entry in Level 4 on Monday because the agency has added information on Gaza and the West Bank. The CDC does not have separate entries in its listing for those.</p> <p>Other significant places at Level 4</p> <p>The CDC does not include the United States in its list of advisories, but it was color-coded at Level 4 on February 7 on the agency's map of travel risk levels.</p> <p>Last week, Mexico and Brazil were the most notable of a dozen places added to Level 4.</p> <p>Other tourist favorites parked on Level 4 even longer include Australia, Canada, France, Peru, Singapore and Spain. The United Kingdom has been there since July 2021.</p> <p>You can view the CDC's risk levels for any global destination on its travel recommendations page.</p>

	In its broader travel guidance , the CDC has recommended avoiding all international travel until you are fully vaccinated.
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HEADLINE	02/08 Canada protesters block border crossing
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/08/americas/canada-trucker-protests-covid-tuesday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Canadian protesters have blocked access to the busiest international crossing in North America in yet another demonstration of their grievances against the nation's Covid-19 rules.</p> <p>After idling trucks and vehicles along roadways in major Canadian cities over the weekend, participants in the "Freedom Convoy" hindered travel Monday at the Ambassador Bridge, which links Windsor, Ontario, and Detroit at the Canadian-US border.</p> <p>Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, emerging Monday from a weeklong isolation after testing positive for the coronavirus, echoed residents and officials frustrated by the demonstrations, which began January 29 as an objection to a vaccine mandate requiring truckers entering Canada to be fully vaccinated or face testing and quarantine requirements.</p> <p>More protesters have since joined to rail against mask mandates, lockdowns, restrictions on gatherings and other efforts to stem the spread of Covid-19. Some have vowed not to leave until certain Covid-19 measures are rescinded, they've told CNN.</p> <p>"Individuals are trying to blockade our economy, our democracy and our fellow citizens' daily lives. It has to stop," Trudeau said Monday during an emergency parliamentary debate in Ottawa.</p> <p>Canada's capital city has endured widespread turmoil, including blaring horns on downtown streets and businesses forced to close temporarily. More than 60 criminal investigations are underway there, as claims of hate crimes, rock-throwing and property damage were reported, police said Sunday. At least 450 citations were issued over the weekend, they said.</p> <p>"We have been 100% full-out on this for the last 10 days straight, and we will not rest until it's done, but we need more help," Police Chief Peter Sloly said Monday, appealing to all levels of government and noting his department asked the mayor's office for a "significant increase" in resources.</p> <p>Many in Ottawa are at their "breaking point," Sloly said.</p> <p>"This is crushing for those residents and their businesses. It has to stop, and we are doing everything we can possibly do to stop it," he said. "We need more help."</p> <p>Protests notwithstanding, nearly 90% of Canada's truckers are fully vaccinated and eligible to cross the border, the Canadian government said. Demonstrators represent a "small, fringe minority," Trudeau said, and his government does not expect the vaccine mandate to significantly affect supply chains.</p> <p>Just over 80% of Canadians in all are vaccinated, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada.</p> <p>Bridge traffic backed up for miles</p> <p>Police worked Monday to restore the orderly flow of traffic due to interruptions at the exit from the Ambassador Bridge onto Huron Church Road, Windsor Police said.</p> <p>"Avoid the area or find alternate route, if possible," police said, calling traffic flow "temporarily interrupted."</p> <p>"Our officers continue to work hard to keep the flow of traffic moving along Huron Church Rd., as well as ensuring order and public safety. ... We encourage everyone to be patient and respectful," Windsor Police said on Twitter.</p>

	<p>Windsor Police posted a photo online earlier in the day showing a long line of trucks appearing to be at a standstill. They also warned of travel delays and a high potential for traffic congestion, and asked "those involved not to endanger members of the public."</p> <p>Access to the bridge from the US side of the border was closed, the Michigan Department of Transportation said Monday night.</p> <p>"The freeway traffic trying to get across the bridge is backed up on multiple roadways and for miles," agency spokeswoman Diane Cross told CNN.</p> <p>More than 40,000 commuters, tourists and truck drivers cross the Ambassador Bridge each day, according to its website.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Seattle PD staffing crisis in crime spike
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/personnel-data-show-seattle-police-facing-crime-spike-amid-staffing-crisis
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — After a spate of weekend violence in Seattle, the police department's staffing levels are under scrutiny again even as Mayor Bruce Harrell has unveiled his administration's plan to combat crime.</p> <p>The mayor unveiled his proposal last Friday by saying the city would no longer tolerate acts of violence in the city.</p> <p>Over the weekend however, Seattle police ended up investigating a string of shootings, including a gun battle in Capitol Hill in which more than 40 bullets were fired by the parties involved.</p> <p>The city logged another shooting that occurred over the weekend in the Seattle Chinatown-International District.</p> <p>Part of Harrell's plan calls for adding more officers to the rolls in order to respond to crime.</p> <p>0 seconds of 0 secondsVolume 90%</p> <p>"Chief Diaz has told me that he cannot deploy enough officers to keep our city safe," Harrell said Friday about the issue.</p> <p>Last year while addressing staffing issues in the department, Interim Police Chief Adrian Diaz said at minimum that the department should have 1,400 total officers</p> <p>Police officials said that the department is budgeted for 1,350 officers. However, while they are budgeted for that amount, there are 1,100 officers on the force and of those, 950 which can be deployed.</p> <p>"With all respects to our mayor, the problem is way bigger than I think a lot of people imagined," said Victoria Beach, a member of the African American Community Advisory Council to Seattle Police. "How are you going to implement all of these things when you don't have a department?"</p> <p>Beach said that while more police officers need to be hired the city should nevertheless focus on hiring the right police officers, a process she said will take time.</p> <p>"I'm so tired of hearing this plan and that plan and their broken promises. We have to be real with each other: we're in a mess," she said. "The sad downside to this is citizens are going to start arming themselves and taking the law into their own hands."</p> <p>Beach offered a solution by suggesting that the department's top brass consider bringing in an outside police department to help, a move that police officials said is not feasible. Those departments have their own workload to take care of.</p>

	<p>Further compounding the problem, a police department spokesperson said that people are not going into law enforcement like they were several decades ago. They said that financial incentives have given them limited success.</p> <p>City Council member Lisa Herbold, who is chairperson of the Public Safety and Human Services Committee, said in a written statement: “I applaud Mayor Harrell’s attention to public safety in Seattle and calling for a multi-layered approach to address the challenges we face. The full year data in the 2021 Year-End Crime Report confirms trends, that crime increased in 2021. The number of shots fired increased as well. With fewer sworn officers, we need comprehensive approaches that blend both traditional public safety and innovative community safety approaches. The Council approved funding for both approaches in 2022.”</p> <p>They said part of that approach includes: “Fully funding the Seattle Police Department’s plan to hire 125 additional police officers more than the department has ever hired in a single year. As in both 2020 and 2021, the budget fully funds the hiring plan developed by SPD.”</p> <p>Herbold’s office told KOMO News on Monday that the council had provided “funding to continue SPD’s analysis of 911 call types they believe may be suitable for a non-officer response, and reduce the workload of police officers,” adding “on staffing, in adopting the 2022 budget the Council requested the creation of a report from the City Budget Office on a citywide hiring incentive program by March 1.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Middle-class priced out of housing market
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-covid-19-housing-market-the-middle-class-is-getting-priced-out-11644246000?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>The dream of homeownership has grown more out of reach for middle-class Americans during the pandemic.</p> <p>The surge in home prices and sharp decline in the number of homes for sale have made home buying more difficult for many Americans compared with two years ago, according to a study from the National Association of Realtors released Monday.</p> <p>At the end of last year, there were about 411,000 fewer homes on the market that were considered affordable for households earning between \$75,000 and \$100,000 than before the pandemic, the study found. At the end of 2019, there was one available listing that was affordable for every 24 households in this income bracket. By December 2021, the figure was one listing for every 65 households.</p> <p>The study, the first of its kind from NAR, calculated affordability for different income tiers by assuming households use a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage and don’t spend more than 30% of their income on housing costs, including taxes and insurance.</p> <p>Unlike traditional measures of housing affordability, which typically compare housing costs to incomes and mortgage rates, the NAR study also took into account the inventory of homes for sale at different price points. The study found that housing affordability worsened over the past two years for all but the very wealthiest Americans, and the shrinking number of homes on the market made home buying more difficult in every income bracket.</p> <p>The Covid-19 pandemic turbocharged the housing market, as buyers sought to take advantage of low mortgage rates and move into bigger houses. But the supply of homes for sale, which was already unusually low before the pandemic, plummeted. Home-building activity slowed and many potential sellers delayed their moves or were reluctant to sell.</p> <p>Americans in the middle-class income levels experienced significant declines in buying power.</p>

Homeownership has been a traditional route for many American families to build wealth. As more home buyers are priced out, their inability to buy could have long-term consequences for their future nest eggs, economists say. Fast-rising rent prices could also make it more difficult for thwarted buyers to save money to enter the market in the future.

“It’s hard when both options are eroding in affordability so quickly,” said Skylar Olsen, principal economist at mortgage-finance startup Tomo Networks, referring to home prices and rent prices. “That will just make your future wealth building even harder.”

For two-person households, the Pew Research Center considers those with household incomes between \$43,399 and \$130,198 to be middle class, based on 2020 income data.

Households earning between \$75,000 and \$100,000 could afford to buy 51% of the active housing inventory in December, NAR said, down from 58% in December 2019. That 7-percentage-point drop was the second-biggest decline among all income brackets, behind households earning between \$100,000 and \$125,000, where affordability slipped 8 percentage points to 63% of the listed homes.

The number of homes for sale or under contract slid to 910,000 at the end of December, [the lowest level on record](#) since NAR began tracking total existing-home inventory in 1999.

“At the end of the day, there are fewer homes that you can afford,” said Nadia Evangelou, senior economist and director of forecasting at NAR. “You have fewer options.”

Record-low mortgage rates have helped offset the impact of higher home prices in the past two years. And even though affordability [has dropped to its lowest level since 2008](#), home buying is still more affordable to households today than it was during the previous housing boom in the early 2000s.

For households earning between \$75,000 and \$100,000, five of the top six metro areas with the fewest affordable homes for sale per household were in California, NAR found, led by the San Jose metro area. The state’s shortage of affordable housing helps explain why many people left California’s coastal cities during the pandemic [and moved inland](#).

Courtney and Tim Haadsma, who live in Grand Rapids, Mich., and who earned about \$100,000 last year, are in one of the income brackets that lost the most ground in terms of housing affordability during the pandemic. The couple started searching for their first home more than a year ago. About 20 offers later, they are still house hunting.

“What we were preparing for two years ago is completely different from the market that we’re in today,” said Ms. Haadsma, who is 25.

The Haadsmas lost their jobs in 2020. They initially wanted to spend about \$200,000 on their first house to make sure they could also save for retirement. They found new jobs, and after losing out on multiple offers, they increased their budget to \$300,000.

Some economists and real-estate agents expect the number of homes for sale to rise this spring, alleviating the pressure on buyers and slowing the rapid price growth. The number of homes currently under construction is at a multiyear high, and many of those homes are set to be completed this year.

But [supply-chain delays continue to slow builder activity](#). And many current homeowners have refinanced at low mortgage rates, which could make them more reluctant to move.

Jemi Khan, a real-estate agent in Plano, Texas, said she wrote dozens of offers on behalf of her clients in January, with little luck.

“Everybody’s predicting the rate is going to go up more, so those people are scrambling to lock something,” she said. “There are so many buyers out there who haven’t found their home.”

HEADLINE	02/07 Shoppers still hoarding 2yrs into pandemic
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/two-years-into-pandemic-shoppers-are-still-hoarding-11644253233?mod=hp_lead_pos11
GIST	<p>Alexis Abell recently walked out of a BJ's Wholesale Club outside Buffalo, N.Y., with 24 boxes of Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, a box of 50 frozen mozzarella sticks, a 40-pound bag of basmati rice and a 12-can pack of garbanzo beans.</p> <p>"I don't want to be in a position again where I can't get something," says Ms. Abell, a 41-year-old mother of five, who was laid off from her retail job at a quilt shop in 2020 and decided not to return to work.</p> <p>She estimates her family is now spending about 25% more a week on food and staples than before the pandemic, and she is buying more than twice as much of some staples and household supplies.</p> <p>"The stimulus money is gone, but we've gotten used to having more on hand and I'm cooking more at home, so I expect this to continue," she says.</p> <p>Retailers and analysts predicted that the bulk buying in the early days of the pandemic, when supplies of many goods were constrained, would subside once people returned to work, stores were able to restock and vaccinations became widespread. Instead, Americans continue to stockpile food and household goods.</p> <p>Many are spending more time at home and remain uncertain about product availability. Some have moved from tight-spaced apartments in cities to more spacious suburban homes, and inflation is spurring a search for savings by buying in bulk.</p> <p>After more than 20 years of steady but slow sales growth, sales at bulk retailers Costco Wholesale Corp., Walmart Inc.'s Sam's Club and BJ's Wholesale Club Holdings Inc. rose 26.6% in dollars and 18% in volume during the fourth quarter of 2021 compared with the same quarter of 2019, according to IRI, far greater than any other type of retail including dollar stores, grocery, drugstores and mass merchants.</p> <p>Their pre-pandemic performance reflected many other trends, such as a surge in just-in-time consumption, in which many Americans destocked their pantries and ordered everything from Q-tips to frozen pizza on-demand. After the financial squeeze of the 2008 recession, more consumers stopped accumulating stockpiles of stuff, preferring to buy less more frequently, and keep more cash on hand. Technological advances made quick deliveries an easy option.</p> <p>Now, the return of bulk shopping is forcing changes at retailers, consumer-products manufacturers and appliance makers.</p> <p>"Consumers who experienced the harsh reality of pandemic shortages made permanent changes," says Bob Nolan, senior vice president of Demand Science at food giant Conagra Brands Inc. "They didn't just stock up that week, but they said to themselves, even if subconsciously, 'That's not going to happen to me again.'"</p> <p>Research firm IRI, which tracks consumption of household goods, shows average annual growth in sales by volume of food and beverages was 3% in 2020 and 2021, compared with just 0.5% average annual growth for the prior 10 years. Consumers are also buying larger package sizes: average volume per unit was up 2.1% last year compared with average sizes in 2019, IRI figures show. Consumption is likely to decline this year from last year, IRI forecasts, but it says levels of food and household goods consumption will still be double pre-pandemic levels.</p> <p>"Even if somebody waves a magic wand and makes Covid go away completely, we still expect elevated consumption in the home because people are accustomed to working from home, and hybrid work is here to stay," says Krishnakumar Davey, president of client engagement at IRI.</p>

Product shortages, while not as severe as 2020, have gotten worse during the Omicron outbreak and are acute in some categories. Food and beverage products overall were 85% in stock for the week ended Jan. 30, compared with stock levels of 93%-95% pre-pandemic, IRI figures show, with shortages in categories like sports drinks (77% in stock), frozen baked goods (79%) and frozen snacks (81%) more severe.

It is human nature to accumulate extra supplies during times of uncertainty, says Ayelet Fishbach, professor of behavioral science and marketing at University of Chicago Booth School of Business. “Psychologically, the cost of underconsumption appears higher than overconsumption,” she says. “We are more upset about not getting our cereal box than having an extra box left over and having to throw it away.”

The majority of new members at Sam’s Club, where membership hit a record in the third quarter of 2021, have been young millennial families, says Megan Crozier, Sam’s chief merchant. The new clientele has prompted Sam’s to shake up its product mix, expand its mobile-app technology and roll out curbside pickup for online orders.

In focus groups, customers said they wanted higher quality goods, including healthier ingredients and clearer labeling. In response, Sam’s removed 475 items from its product mix in July 2020. It reformulated nearly 600 products and launched 650 new items. When customers complained that its private label beer-battered cod was “not crispy enough,” Sam’s worked with its fish supplier to change the recipe and packaging and relaunched the product last spring.

Sam’s canceled orders for product categories that members said they didn’t need at the beginning of the pandemic, including jewelry, televisions and apparel, and focused on what consumers said they wanted: frozen pizza, ice cream, canned goods, paper towels, cleaning products and meat.

Jenn Gerlach, a 32-year-old mother in Detroit, says she started stocking up at Sam’s once her family started eating most meals at home early in the pandemic. Concerned about shortages and rising prices, she is continuing to buy in bulk.

“Whatever’s on sale, if I find it I will stock it,” says Mrs. Gerlach, who estimates she spends \$200 to \$300 a week on groceries, up from \$150 in the past. “Buying food in bulk at stores like Sam’s helps keep the cost down and allows us to keep our stockpile up.”

At the height of the pandemic, Americans ate 88% of their meals at home, according to retail research firm NPD Group, up from 83% pre-pandemic. Meals eaten at home have since leveled off to about 85%, but the 2 percentage point increase from 2019 levels is equivalent to an estimated 2.9 billion meals and snacks per quarter, NPD says.

Conagra, which makes frozen meals under its Birds Eye, P.F. Chang’s and Marie Callender’s brands, has seen demand skyrocket for many of its frozen dinners. It increased production of Marie Callender’s pot pies by 25% to 200 million units in October 2020. It added a new production line at its factory in Russellville, Ark., hiring an additional 50 people. Sales of large-size pot pies for multiple people have been driving the retail growth, the company says, with sales up 24.6% in 2021 compared with two years ago.

“We thought we’d have a lull in demand because people bought so much initially. But the reality is [consumers] have established a new inventory level,” and want more items stocked in their freezers, says Conagra’s Mr. Nolan.

Kraft Heinz Co. is installing a new production line for its macaroni and cheese cups that will result in a “significant increase in capacity” by the end of the first quarter of this year, the company says. Bulk sales of macaroni and cheese far outpace sales of smaller sizes: Unit sales of its 18-box package, available at club stores, grew 40% in 2021 over 2020, while sales of Kraft’s single boxes actually declined.

Hailey Matuoizzi, a 35-year-old science teacher from Merrick, N.Y., used to grab breakfast on the go and buy lunch at the high school where she taught. But after taking a leave during the pandemic to stay home with her two children, she finds herself cooking at home and ordering extra supplies so she doesn't get caught when products aren't on shelves.

"If I see pancake mix, I buy four boxes to just make sure I have them," says Ms. Matuoizzi, who ordered 40 yogurt pouches for her kids last week. "I want to have a month or two of supplies on hand."

She turned an IKEA storage cabinet in her sunroom into a second pantry and is now shopping for a second refrigerator.

Last year, sales of chest freezers in the U.S. more than doubled to 1.714 million units from 768,600 in 2019, according to the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers. Refrigerator sales rose to 12.8 million units in 2021, up from 11.1 million units in 2019.

In spring 2020, executives at LG Electronics USA Inc., the North American subsidiary of the Korean appliance giant, were mystified by the unexpected spike in demand for its 20-cubic-foot top freezer refrigerator models, which are normally purchased for apartments. Customer survey data showed people were buying the units as second refrigerators, often putting them in their garages or basements.

By summer 2020, LG had sold out of the units and needed to rev up production quickly, says William Kwon, senior product manager at LG. The company filled demand initially by switching over an assembly line for a different model at its Mexico factory. By that summer, the company decided to permanently increase capacity, hiring more than 500 new workers for its Mexican plant and adding a new production line.

LG more than doubled the model's capacity in 2021 and plans to expand capacity again this year. It expects to finally be able to meet demand for the units by summer 2022, Mr. Kwon says. "We truly believe the pandemic is not just a one time thing but that consumers have changed their behavior in their home," he says.

Alex Litinetsky, the chief operating officer of Banneton Bakery, was thrilled when Sam's Club asked the Swedesboro, N.J., company to step up production of breakfast Danishes in the spring of 2020.

Demand for breakfast foods at home was rising since people were no longer buying food on their way to work or school. Sam's, which buys the frozen pastry dough from Banneton and then bakes and packages the pastries, needed to aggressively increase its inventory for customers who were now buying multipacks.

Banneton shifted the output normally for restaurants, casinos and cruise ships—which had evaporated in the pandemic—into products for retail, but still needed to scale up. "There were several waves along the way when people were stocking up with anything they could get their hands on, and we couldn't keep up with orders," Mr. Litinetsky says.

A previously planned major factory expansion was under way. Banneton added new milk, flour and butter suppliers, and it tripled its workforce so that three shifts could work around the clock. The company boosted salaries, eventually to \$17 an hour from \$10 in 2019, to compete for labor. Banneton is planning another expansion this March to add cold storage, doubling the footprint of its plant.

Mr. Litinetsky believes consumers will keep buying in bulk now that they're used to it. "Once people get a taste for better quality food they will continue to seek it out," he says.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Concrete worker strike nears 3 rd month
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3340372/construction-layoffs-into-the-thousands-more-to-come-as-concrete-worker-strike-nears-third-month/

GIST	<p>Picket lines on major construction sites around the Puget Sound region have been in effect since November. Thousand of construction workers have been laid off as a result, and more will likely follow as negotiations with concrete suppliers remain at a standstill.</p> <p>Jaime Fleming, a spokesperson with Teamsters 174, representing 330 workers employed by various local concrete suppliers, confirmed with MyNorthwest that “employers are still stonewalling and refusing any contact or conversation with us.”</p> <p>Fleming also noted that “thousands” of construction workers have been laid off over the course of the strike “with more to come.” Striking members with Teamsters 174 lost health coverage Feb. 1.</p> <p>Speaking in front of Sound Transit’s Board of Directors Jan. 27, the agency’s executive officer Peter Rogoff detailed the number of layoffs that have affected major construction sites related to the transportation agency.</p> <p>“The strike is not only having a very troubling impact on our light rail extension to Lynnwood, the Eastside downtown Redmond and Federal Way, but also to our construction workforce. As of today, our contractors have had to lay off more than 174 workers from our construction sites, due to the lack of concrete and delays to associated work, with additional layoffs threatening an additional 120 workers at the end of this month,” Rogoff said.</p> <p>“Since early December, or after the strike began, we’ve missed delivery of more than 14,000 cubic yards of concrete. That’s equivalent to 1,400 truckloads, or, to give you some perspective, a line of concrete trucks stretching more than nine miles in length.”</p> <p>At the time of the meeting, Rogoff was optimistic that the federal negotiator brought in to smooth contract talks over would resolve the strike. The Teamsters describe the federal mediation as an “unmitigated failure,” according to correspondence with the labor group in late January.</p> <p>Concrete suppliers affected by the strike include Gary Merlino Construction, Stoneway Concrete, Cadman, Glacier/CalPortland, Salmon Bay Sand & Gravel, and Lehigh Cement.</p> <p>Workers with Gary Merlino Construction walked off the job on an Unfair Labor Practice strike Nov. 19. The other suppliers have been impacted by similar strikes since Dec. 3.</p> <p>Construction sites delayed by the strike go beyond light rail extension. Eleven affordable housing projects with over 1,400 apartments are affected, in addition to the multibillion-dollar expansion of Microsoft’s headquarters. The Washington State Department of Transportation said the strike has led to contractor layoffs and delays across its projects in King County, including the 520 Bridge project and the expansion of 405 between Renton and Bellevue.</p> <p>Over the summer, the Teamsters 174 resolved a separate AGC Construction Agreement on behalf of construction industry drivers. Fleming confirmed that the terms under that agreement were similar to that proposed to Gary Merlino Construction, and the decision to strike was over a proposed retiree medical plan, tantamount to demand for an additional \$0.46 an hour, according to Fleming.</p> <p>“The Companies have provided the Teamsters with the best package we have ever offered which includes a 17.6% pay increase over three years, improves pension contributions, provides excellent medical benefits, and generous retiree medical insurance rarely found in other labor contracts,” a statement on behalf of the employers from January reads.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Canada: arrests, seizures; Ottawa protest
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/07/canada-ottawa-truckers-protests-arrests/
GIST	Canada’s capital is long used to hosting protests. But the self-described Freedom Convoy has been an unusual and intimidating presence in Ottawa since it rolled up nearly a dozen days ago with its

snowballing list of grievances, from opposing vaccine mandates and lockdowns to antipathy toward recently reelected Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Big rigs and other vehicles continue to block crucial downtown arteries, snarling traffic, blaring their horns and fraying residents' nerves. The protest has forced several businesses to close because of safety concerns. National monuments are now fenced off after protesters desecrated them. In a surreal scene, a man on horseback traveled down a road in front of Parliament over the weekend, waving a Trump 2024 flag.

Ottawa Police Chief Peter Sloly has called it a "siege." Ontario Premier Doug Ford cast it as an "occupation."

In a tweet Sunday, Trudeau said that Canada will always support the right to protest, but that "they don't have the right to blockade our economy, or our democracy, or our fellow citizens' daily lives. It has to stop."

The convoy, which has attracted the attention of combatants in the U.S. culture wars and drawn support from former president Donald Trump and Elon Musk, is spurring solidarity demonstrations elsewhere in Canada and inspiring similar protests from Europe to Australia. As it drags on, questions are mounting about what critics say has been the insufficient response of authorities — and what comes next.

"It's so unprecedented that as we watched it, and as the police and government watched it approaching, they could not recognize it for what it was," said Michael Kempa, a criminologist at the University of Ottawa. "It was figuratively outside our conceptual frame for what was possible for the city of Ottawa or for a protest in Canada."

Police have now begun trying to choke off the supply lines of food, fuel and other goods that have sustained the protesters. Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson declared a state of emergency on Sunday, saying authorities were "losing the battle" against groups that were "calling the shots." He asked the federal and provincial governments for 1,800 more officers.

Police said Sunday that they had fully cleared and fenced off a downtown park near City Hall where protesters had erected a wooden structure that functioned as a kitchen. They also seized fuel, including a full tanker of gas, from a well-stocked logistics hub in the parking lot of a baseball stadium.

Videos shared to social media showed protesters chanting "shame" at officers.

"We are turning up the heat every way we possibly can," Sloly said Monday. He also said that he needed far more resources to bring the "unlawful" blockade to an end and that officers are working with no days off.

Ottawa police said they have launched 60 criminal investigations, issued hundreds of tickets, towed vehicles and made at least 20 arrests since Friday. They warned that anyone found to be supplying trucks with fuel could face charges. Local media on Monday still documented people carrying cans of fuel to blockading vehicles.

"Every time we knock something down, there are attempts for it to pop up in four or five other locations," Sloly said.

Canada Unity, one of the main groups behind the protest, had tried in the past to launch such a convoy. The imposition last month of U.S. and Canadian rules requiring cross-border truckers to be fully vaccinated and broader pandemic fatigue helped galvanize support.

The protest has since grown into a broader movement against all coronavirus measures — which are mostly imposed by provincial governments — and Trudeau. Police say a "significant element" from the United States has been involved in organizing and funding it.

The demonstrators are a mix of people opposed to vaccine mandates and public health measures, anti-vaccine activists, conspiracy theorists, far-right extremists and anti-government activists.

Canada Unity has been seeking signatures on a “memorandum of understanding” asking the governor general, who represents Queen Elizabeth II in Canada, and the Senate to rescind public health measures or dissolve the government — actions that lie well outside their constitutional powers.

“It’s a moment of maturing of populist sentiment in Canada,” said Amarnath Amarasingam, a Queen’s University professor who studies extremism. “There was always a kind of populist bent to some politics in Canada, but it was always pretty small. That changed after covid ... because it really brought a lot of different groups that were anti-government and ideologically quite disparate in the same sandbox.”

Kempa said the United States is more experienced at dealing with “radicalized political protest.”

“Canada, for its own conceits, has imagined that this is not our problem,” he said. “I think we are realizing we have much more in common with our American neighbors.”

‘Significant element’ from U.S. involved in self-described ‘Freedom Convoy’ in Canada, official says

Sloly has warned that “there may not be a policing solution to this demonstration” and that he and other commanders were “looking at every single option, including military aid to civil power” to end it.

Trudeau said last week that sending in the army to end the protests was “not in the cards.” He noted that most Canadians supported parties during the federal election in September that backed vaccine mandates.

His government said Monday it was convening a “trilateral table” with provincial and local officials to respond to the protesters. But officials gave no indication that they would back down from the vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers.

“We cannot allow an angry crowd to reverse a course that continues to save lives in this last stretch,” Marco Mendicino, Canada’s public safety minister, said during a news conference. “This should never be a precedent for how to make policy in Canada.”

Some protesters have flown Confederate flags or flags with swastikas on them. Ottawa police and local residents say they’ve been intimidated, subjected to racist vitriol and harassed for wearing masks.

A women’s shelter said some clients were checking themselves into hospital because the incessant honking had “re-traumatized” them.

“It feels like we are being held hostage,” said Kiavash Najafi, who lives in Centretown, a diverse, bustling neighborhood just south of Parliament Hill.

An Ontario court issued a 10-day injunction on Monday against the use of air horns, but it was unclear how it would be enforced.

Though the number of vehicles blockading the roads and people participating in the protests has dropped off significantly since the first weekend, there appears to be no end in sight.

Amid the frustration, the police have drawn criticism for not anticipating the disruption or preparing for it. Police officials in other cities, wary of following the path Ottawa police took, have managed to prevent protesters in their cities from prolonged blockades.

Sloly has said that police fear the demonstrators could use their vehicles as weapons against them and that some protesters might be armed. He told reporters Monday that the protest's core organizers told police they would arrive on Jan. 28 and leave on Jan. 30.

"That is what we planned for," he said.

Kempa said Ottawa police tried to respond with a strategy of containment, having learned the lessons of the 2010 Group of 20 summit in Toronto, where an aggressive and widely criticized response to protests resulted in authorities paying out more than \$13 million in a class-action settlement.

"The police are meant to contain mass protests [and] only intervene when there are flagrant and dangerous violations of the law involving violence, damage to property [or] hate speech, and more or less allowing this thing to peter out with the passage of time," he said. "That is not an approach that will work with this type of protest, where the intention is to stay until specific political demands are met. ... Now there's stalemate."

Amarasingam sees various ways this could end, including an internal collapse within the movement over money or objectives, a "spark" that would spur authorities to take a harsher response or through negotiation.

"I'm not sure where this goes," he said. "I think the way they've set up shop, they'll be here for a while."

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HEADLINE	02/07 Inflation gobbles up fresh produce
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/02/07/grocery-produce-inflation-guacamole/
GIST	<p>In the past year, inflation swerved around grocery stores like a wobbly shopping cart, slamming into the meat department, milk, eggs and even toothpaste.</p> <p>Fresh fruits and vegetables were largely spared. Until recently.</p> <p>The percentage increase in produce prices from November to December, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <u>was twice that</u> of other food categories. (Prices for meats, poultry, fish and eggs actually declined a bit in December after rising for seven months straight). Produce prices stayed nearly flat in 2020, rose slightly in most of 2021, then really shot up in the last four weeks of that year, according to data from the International Fresh Produce Association.</p> <p>The increases have been felt by groceries, restaurants and others. The average price-per-pound of fresh vegetables shipped in December was 19 percent higher than a year earlier, and fresh fruit was up 10 percent from the previous year, according to the research firm NPD Group, which tracks food shipped to restaurants through major distributors such as US Foods and Sysco.</p> <p>Produce is a "cart starter," said John Ross, the chief executive of the Independent Grocers Alliance, a chain of grocery stores that operates in more than 30 countries. What that means is that grocery stores live or die by whether they are a good source of produce, so every store tries to hold those prices down for as long as possible, Ross said.</p> <p>When inflation is at 2 or 3 percent, grocery stores have tools to shield shoppers from those increases, but when inflation gets over 5 or 6 percent, a retailer runs out of options.</p> <p>"What that really means is intense pressure on lower- and middle-income consumers," Ross said, "because those increases have to be passed on to them."</p> <p>The squeeze is not felt only at grocery stores, but also at food banks feeding the neediest Americans. For the Greater Boston Food Bank, bananas went from \$10 per case to \$12.30 in the past two weeks, said</p>

Catherine Drennan Lynn, a spokeswoman for the food bank. Apples are up 20 percent. Citrus is up 7 percent. Packaged salads were up 5 percent at the end of December. Lynn said even canned vegetables are up 20 percent.

She said that although the food bank hasn't had to deal with any long-term shortfalls, 15 to 20 percent of inbound food deliveries have been delayed or gone missing altogether because of problems in the supply chain. "Clearly, we're having to spend more on food across the board," Lynn said.

Some of the reasons for higher produce prices are the same labor shortages, transportation problems, fuel-price increases and supply chain hiccups that have plagued other parts of commerce during the pandemic. But some culprits are new.

Import issues

During winter, the United States relies more heavily on imports from Mexico and South America, especially fruits. The Mexican minimum wage has almost doubled in the past four years. And on Jan. 1, [it rose](#) 22 percent. Increased wages add to production costs, which often pass upstream to wholesalers, retailers and consumers. And for items such as table grapes, which are shipped from Peru after California's fall harvest has ended, the container rate a year ago was \$5,000. It's now \$12,000, according to David Magaña, a senior analyst for RaboResearch Food & Agribusiness.

"Prices for table grapes have risen double digits in the past couple weeks," he said. "That's one commodity where transportation costs are having an impact."

Another problem that is slowing produce imports, and thus making them more expensive, is a new agricultural inspection program at the Mexico-U.S. border "that caught people by surprise," according to Michael Swanson, Wells Fargo's chief agricultural economist. "Any time you slow down the throughput, you reduce availability; the net was it increased prices."

Swanson said winter snow storms in many parts of the country also have slowed trucked deliveries of produce and increased prices.

Changing tastes

Demand for fruits high in vitamin C, vegetables high in antioxidants and items reverentially described as "superfoods" has exploded during the pandemic, Magaña said. Months of remote work led to what he called "the smoothie effect" — stuck at home, we wanted to whiz up something healthful and convenient, and some changes in consumption are sticking, he said.

For millennials and Gen Zers, who make up an increasingly large segment of grocery consumers, there is a "cult of fresh," meaning a strong preference for fresh fruits and vegetables and an aversion to canned goods, Magaña said. For Florida oranges, which this year were the [smallest crop](#) since 1945, prices rose about 6 percent in January, [according to](#) the market research firm Nielsen. Younger generations are driving demand for fresh berries such as blueberries 52 weeks a year, which increases transportation costs for those items sourced from far-flung places when they are not in season domestically, Magaña said. In the last week of 2021, prices for conventional blueberries were 45 percent higher than the year before, according to USDA data analyzed by Agronomics, a market research firm.

And something weird is happening with avocados, Magaña said. A year ago, the United States had record shipments of avocados coming from Mexico. This year, despite consistently high demand, shipments are more in line with the five-year average. There just aren't enough to meet demand, which has driven prices higher. Avocados are 100 percent more expensive than they were a year ago, according to Magaña, now costing \$50 per carton.

What is grown

Fertilizer accounts for about 15 percent of a farmer's expenses. Fertilizer prices are up 300 percent in the past 12 months. Rising energy costs, particularly the price of natural gas, have elevated costs even more,

	<p>according to Aaron Rutstein, the risk services director for the Americas for Atradius, a credit insurance company.</p> <p>“That affects how much farmers plant,” he said. “And companies have decisions to make: Do we absorb these increases or lose market share?”</p> <p>Abe Eshkenazi, the chief executive of the Association for Supply Chain Management, said the severity and duration of natural disasters has increased over the past 20 years, leading to changes in what, and how much, is planted.</p> <p>Last summer’s protracted drought in California saw fewer farmers planting canning tomatoes and water-intensive crops such as melons. Limits on irrigation water and the occurrence of crop-wrecking floods prompt farmers to make conservative decisions about acreage planted, which can create imbalances between supply and demand or drive more imports.</p> <p>Experts are still debating when these inflationary pressures may ease, but they agree it will be gradual.</p> <p>“You’ll see inflation in a lot of categories moving in waves,” Rutstein said. “It didn’t start overnight, and it won’t get fixed overnight.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/06 Covid not gone but frustrated moving on
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/06/covid-attitudes-changing/
GIST	<p>Andrew Markert respects the coronavirus. It has messed with his livelihood, a D.C. pub called Beuchert’s Saloon, forcing him to close, move outdoors and adjust in countless other ways.</p> <p>But the time has arrived for him to move forward and stick to his plans, come what may in the next round of the pandemic. And he’s betting there are a lot of people like him.</p> <p>So Markert plans to open not one, but two new restaurants in the next couple of months — Fight Club, a few doors down from Beuchert’s, in February and the upscale Newland around the corner in April.</p> <p>“I’m cautiously optimistic that we’re at the end of it,” he said as workers scraped and primed Fight Club’s interior last week. “I’m mentally over it, but physically still cautious.”</p> <p>Fatigued, frustrated and frazzled by five surges over two years, some parts of the U.S. population have decided to simply live with the coronavirus and move on. And with a triple-shot of vaccine on board — or protection acquired from prior infection — alongside case numbers falling precipitously, polls show their numbers are increasing.</p> <p>The Atlantic last month declared some of them the “Vaxxed and done,” and Time magazine this week is exploring “How Covid Ends,” its cover a hopeful portrait of the spiky red virus fading to black.</p> <p>Some municipalities and schools are shedding mask requirements. Elected officials no longer even talk about conquering the virus, as President Biden did just seven months ago, in the short-lived glow of the vaccine rollout. A bipartisan group of governors told Biden last week at the White House it is time to “move away from the pandemic,” in the words of Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson (R).</p> <p>“People are striving for more normal life,” Hutchinson told reporters.</p> <p>In Seattle, Joe English, 30, isn’t throwing all caution to the wind. He said he’s still avoiding indoor dining and limiting unmasked, indoor gatherings with friends. But as soon as he was vaccinated in March, English was ready to return to attending the concerts he had missed since the pandemic began.</p>

Inglish attended 27 shows in 2019 and none in 2020, a major lifestyle shift. He knows that returning could expose him to covid-19. But with a KN95 mask, he said he feels relatively protected, and he's no longer willing to give up something so important to him.

"Given all the other precautions I've taken," he said, "I'm allowing myself this one minor risk."

In a January Monmouth poll, 28 percent of Americans said the country would "never" get the outbreak under control and return to normal — up from 9 percent in March 2021.

An Axios/Ipsos poll taken about the same time found that 61 percent believe the vaccine allowed them to return to something like their pre-covid routine. And a KFF poll found that 77 percent of Americans believe most people will inevitably develop covid-19 anyway, a sentiment that crosses party lines.

Polling during the pandemic is volatile, as Ariel Edwards-Levy, a polling and elections analytics editor at CNN has pointed out, since it tends to reflect the state of the pandemic at the moment. But experts said we should not be surprised if these sentiments are growing.

Most people are averse to uncertainty, said Maurice Schweitzer, a behavioral scientist and professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and the past two years have seen nothing else. Many people are beyond exhausted.

"We'd like to be done," Schweitzer said. "The problem is, it's a virus. It's not getting tired."

People realize that "if I keep waiting for the right time, it would be a long wait," Schweitzer said. "If you're starting a business or starting a family ... you might think, 'Well let's do it now, let's move forward.'" Others arrived at this point long ago.

Of course, we've been here before. Several times.

"Today, while the virus hasn't been vanquished, we know this: It no longer controls our lives. It no longer paralyzes our nation. And it's within our power to make sure it never does again," Biden said on July 4.

"It's going to disappear. One day — it's like a miracle — it will disappear," President Donald Trump said on Feb. 27, 2020. "And from our shores, we — you know, it could get worse before it gets better. It could maybe go away. We'll see what happens. Nobody really knows."

Today we do know: Predictions of the virus's demise have been wrong every time. Most experts have given up trying. We are just one variant away from going through it all over again.

Even as case numbers are plummeting, they are still at staggering, record levels for the entire pandemic — a seven-day average of over 300,000 on Sunday, according to data tracked by The Washington Post. The daily death toll has surpassed the total in every other wave but last winter's. The U.S. death total has reached 900,000.

Only 64 percent of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated, and the proportion that has received booster shots lags well behind that. Children under 5 are not yet able to be vaccinated at all, though the shots could be available by the end of the month.

Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine for children under 5 could be available by the end of February, people with knowledge say

The same polls that show people exhausted by the pandemic also reveal that many are more worried about infection during the omicron surge than they were during some previous waves.

Kim Hauriel of Naples, Fla., is flummoxed by those who argue it's time to get back to normal. Two years into the pandemic, the 51-year-old, her husband and children remain extremely cautious about covid, even after being vaccinated.

They have not gone out to eat, considering even outdoor dining to carry too great a risk. They avoid gatherings of all sizes. And they always wear masks — N95s for Hauriel and her husband and KF94s for the kids.

"It's not that difficult to lift your pinkie finger and just put on a mask, be a little safer, avoid unnecessary gatherings or have them more safely outdoors, still masked," she said. "It's difficult to relate. I'm not giving up."

Hauriel said she worries about the risk of long covid and the chance of spreading the virus to the vulnerable. And she doesn't want to take up a hospital bed "just for being careless."

Once people move on, it will be even more difficult to reverse course if another surge occurs. When Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D) said in December that "the emergency is over," because of the widespread availability of vaccines, Colorado Medical Society President Mark Johnson pushed back.

"I think the governor speaks for probably 70 percent of people who say, 'I'm through with this.'" But hospitals are still seeing an overwhelming number of patients, and although most made the choice not to get vaccinated, health-care workers "don't have that luxury of saying, 'It's your own fault; let's move on,'" he said Thursday.

People respond differently to the stress of the pandemic, said Todd Farchione, a clinical psychologist and associate professor at Boston University. Some may feel comforted by restrictions and mandates and others may be feeling "done" with the pandemic, he said.

"Then there's everything in between," he said. In any risk assessment, a person may consider, "what are the real risks here relative to what's important to me in my life, and what I need in terms of caring for and being there for friends and family, being part of life?"

The pandemic has caused nearly two years of collective trauma. Many people are near a breaking point.

Markert's step forward came by chance, when two spaces for new restaurants opened unexpectedly last year just a few steps from Beuchert's. He wasn't looking to expand in the middle of an unpredictable pandemic. But he also didn't want to let the prolonged upheaval stand in his way.

"What it comes down to is opportunity," he said. "The opportunity was there and it's not every day you get a chance to open a restaurant four doors or five doors down from your current restaurant. ... And obviously when we started going down this path, omicron wasn't even a thing. Cases were dropping. Delta variant wasn't that prominent in the area."

"Just sort of exhausted by it," added Bart Hutchins, chef and co-owner of Fight Club, "and hoping that we're at the tail end of it."

Kevin Volpp, director of the Center for Health Incentives and Behavioral Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that before the omicron wave, some workplaces were encouraging employees to return to pre-pandemic in-office work schedules.

"It's a little bit like riding a roller coaster and everyone is wondering: Are we going to be going up or are we going to be going down?," Volpp said. "Omicron kind of threw everything out of the window at least temporarily. But things are starting to recalibrate — people are starting to make plans again."

Unless a new variant arrives, current conditions are "leading to an opening up again in a way that I think will probably continue to evolve steadily in the coming weeks," he said. "I feel like people collectively

	have been carrying around this huge burden of worrying about covid, and it affects their lives, their performance in lots of ways. People are really worn out by that.”
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HEADLINE	02/07 Frontier, Spirit merging; customers impact?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/02/07/frontier-spirit-merger-faq/
GIST	<p>Budget airlines Frontier and Spirit announced plans Monday for a merger that would create the fifth-largest airline in the United States. Combined, the carriers plan to offer more than 1,000 daily flights to over 145 destinations in 19 countries.</p> <p>If you have tickets on an upcoming Spirit or Frontier flight, or are considering buying them, you might be wondering what the merger means for your trip. By The Way spoke with industry experts about what customers can expect.</p> <p>Is my plane ticket still valid? Frontier and Spirit said customers will not see any changes to their existing travel reservations. Customers should continue to book and manage their reservations via the airlines’ respective websites.</p> <p>What happens to my rewards points from programs like Free Spirit and Frontier Miles? The carriers said they expect to expand membership and frequent flier opportunities as part of the merger, but they will operate independently until the deal is closed, which they expect to happen in the second half of this year. After that, the airlines will provide updates to participating customers.</p> <p>Scott Keyes, founder of Scott’s Cheap Flights, said that as the airlines eventually create a single loyalty program, “they’ll go back and determine what they think one Frontier point is worth in Spirit miles.” He noted that the process is difficult and tough to do fairly. “It’s very much unclear who will come out as the winner or who will come out as the loser here,” he said.</p> <p>Will ticket prices go up for Frontier and Spirit flights? Michael Boyd, president of aviation consulting firm Boyd Group International, said he does not expect prices to go up for Frontier and Spirit, which both offer very low base fares. That’s because they don’t compete against one another in many of the same markets, unlike the situation for Delta and Northwest, which announced a merger in 2008. “There were a number of markets where they overlapped each other, so the logical thing is if they merge, they’ll fly less and charge more,” Boyd said.</p> <p>He also noted that they primarily target customers traveling for leisure, “so, it’s a different clientele, [and] it’s a different market strategy than traditional airline mergers.”</p> <p>Keyes said his fear, however, is that the merger could result in higher fares by decreasing competition between airlines. “Competition between airlines is the single biggest determinant of how many cheap flights travelers can expect to see on a given route,” he said.</p> <p>Will Frontier and Spirit still charge the same fees? While Frontier and Spirit market themselves as low-cost carriers, they do charge passengers various additional fees, like for carry-on bags. Keyes said that “having a very low upfront price but a completely unbundled experience where you can expect to pay for every little thing” has long been a profitable approach for both airlines. He said it’s unlikely the two airlines would upend that system when combined.</p> <p>Will service improve after the merger? Neither Frontier nor Spirit have always earned raves from fliers. Both airlines had the worst customer satisfaction ratings in the industry each year since 2017, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index.</p> <p>The carriers said the merger will benefit passengers by giving them more reliable service and delivering “more ultralow fares to more people in more places.”</p>

When flights on airlines like Frontier and Spirit get canceled, rebooking can cause headaches for customers because “they normally have very few flights from A to B,” Boyd says. He does not expect to change.

Robert W. Mann Jr., an industry analyst and aviation consultant, said he hopes the airlines will take the opportunity to improve various aspects of their operations, noting reliability and on-time performance as areas where they have fallen short. “If your objective is to do something at ultralow costs,” he said, “then the single best way of doing that is by doing it so reliably that you never have to do it over.”

Boyd suggested customers may end up having a better experience after the merger. Spirit and Frontier have made moves over the past few years to be more customer-focused, he said, including increasing hiring and training of consumer-facing staff.

“The whole attitude a couple years back was, ‘We’ve got a seat. You’ve got money.’ That’s the relationship,” Boyd said. “And now ... it’s almost been like, ‘We want you to come back again.’ ”

Will Frontier or Spirit stop flying to my city?

The airlines are already prone to pull out of a given city if they aren’t seeing a return on their investment, and that’s unlikely to change after merging, Keyes said. “Budget airlines have been much more willing to expand aggressively and try out new markets and service those, and they certainly are willing to cut their losses when they feel like a route is not serving them well,” he said.

Keyes noted that after the deal is done, if the combined Frontier and Spirit don’t feel as much competition, they could consolidate their route networks. He added that any promises of expanded routes should be taken with a “pretty hefty grain of salt,” given that the merger is subject to regulatory approval, and that the airlines must convince regulators that the deal is a good move for consumers.

What can we learn from past airline mergers?

Airline mergers [can be tricky](#), as companies have to integrate everything including technology systems and policies, ideally without disrupting service.

Mann said determining how to go about unifying booking and check-in systems, frequent-flier programs and other operations takes time. “That doesn’t get decided on Day 1 or even Day 30,” he said. Experts said fully merging the two airlines could take years.

Boyd noted that Frontier and Spirit, however, are “a lot less complex,” than carriers like American Airlines, so there are fewer variables: They don’t have a ton of international or long-haul service, and they operate one general type of aircraft — though he noted their respective fleets are different.

While there is a slew of behind-the-scenes logistics, Boyd said, the customer experience will stay largely the same. “In most cases,” he said, “we’re just taking some airplanes and just repainting them.”

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HEADLINE	02/07 Homeless youth programs amid pandemic
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/equity/2022/02/how-programs-homeless-youth-pivoted-pandemic
GIST	<p>Before the pandemic, Jordan Gilbert would connect with the homeless young people she’s charged with helping by meeting them in schools, parks, libraries and drop-in centers where they could get a shower and a hot meal.</p> <p>After making those connections, Gilbert, the interim manager of the REACH Center’s housing assistance program, called ACT, would encourage her 12- to 24-year-old clients to show up and apply for aid at the Tacoma agency, whose name is shorthand for Resources for Educational Advancement, Careers, and Housing. If they needed gas or groceries, Gilbert would meet them at the point of purchase to pay for it.</p>

But when schools closed and the state locked down against COVID-19 in March 2020, Gilbert and many employees at organizations serving homeless youth felt a wave of panic. How would they aid students trying to attend remote school from inside a car? Or reach kids quarantining in crowded homes where money for food and rent already was stretched thin?

“My biggest concern was, how are we going to serve these youth and young adults, and how are we going to help them stay safe?” Gilbert said of those first days. “And then my other thought was, ‘Oh my gosh, my team, how are we going to keep them healthy and still do our jobs? We can’t shut down.’”

But Gilbert was also “a little excited” because she saw an opportunity to make the ACT program more accessible and appealing to young people by moving more of its services online.

Within two days of the state’s COVID-19 shutdown, Gilbert, 30, set up a Facebook page and an online form in English and Spanish, where youth could request assistance at their convenience. The REACH Center, which also connects youth with education, employment and health care, created a live web chat and began sending youth money for food or other modest needs via PayPal.

“We were very nervous that we would have zero clients, because we couldn’t be out in the community reaching out to them and connecting with them,” said Devon Isakson, REACH interim director.

Instead, the number of young people reaching out to the organization exploded. REACH worked with more than 800 youth in 2021, up from 300 in the 12 months prior to March 2020. Isakson attributes the increase to both greater accessibility and increased needs.

The shift to virtual outreach “has completely changed the dynamic of how we communicate with youth and young adults, because we are meeting them where they are,” said Gilbert, who briefly experienced homelessness when she started as an ACT program intern in 2019.

As COVID-19 upended their usual protocols, some nonprofits that didn’t manage to alter their outreach strategies saw the tally of homeless youth they served plummet. But for other organizations, in Washington and across the country, the pandemic spurred innovations in how they find and serve a population whose needs were amplified and, in some ways, made more acute because of COVID-19.

Like REACH, a number of service providers adopted online and telephone-based options for young people to apply for housing, attend support groups and connect with case managers, mental health counselors and doctors. Other groups went in the opposite direction, delivering food and other supplies directly to youth and their families wherever they were sheltered, including in cars and motel rooms.

Several organizations around the country also began experimenting with giving cash directly to young people, allowing them to determine how best to meet their own needs. One of those is [Point Source Youth](#), which, in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, is piloting monthly \$1,250 cash transfers to young adults in New York and California.

“The pandemic exploded a lot of preconceived notions that young people experiencing homelessness have to go through certain hoops, have to show up in certain places, have to take certain assessments,” said Larry Cohen, co-founder and executive director of Point Source Youth, which supports service providers across the country with training, evaluation and advocacy. Instead, Cohen said, more organizations are reimagining their services to reflect what young people who have experienced homelessness say they need.

In another example of service providers trying something new, staffers at [The Night Ministry](#) in Chicago helped connect homeless young people with telehealth appointments when they couldn’t get a face-to-face visit with their physicians. The staffers handed the young people boxes of donated food while they waited, sometimes for months, to requalify for food stamps.

Service providers, and funders, too, “are much more open to new ways of doing things,” Cohen said, “because it’s been clear in really painful ways that the old way hasn’t worked.”

That’s clear from the numbers: Nationwide, at least 4.2 million young people 13 to 25 experience homelessness each year, according to a 2017 [national survey](#) by Chapin Hall. A majority reported having lived in a car, tent or other place “not meant for human habitation,” or in temporary housing such as a homeless shelter. In Washington state, more than 40,000 students experienced homelessness during the 2018-2019 school year, including 5,736 in Pierce County, where Tacoma is located, according to [Building Changes](#). According to the latest available data, children of color make up [46% of the state’s under 18 population](#), but they represent 61% of homeless students in the state.

“The bottom line is, a lack of housing and a lack of services for young people who are experiencing homelessness means we are going to see prostitution, prison and death,” said Shawna Kemppainen, executive director of [The Place](#), which provides emergency shelter and street outreach in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The pandemic spurred the nonprofit to open a new drop-in center and begin building 50 units of permanent supportive housing for young adults. “So we have to step up and do more of this across the country,” Kemppainen said.

Going virtual

Nearly two years into the pandemic, REACH and similar organizations have returned to meeting young people in schools and other reopened spaces. But the group’s new online offerings are here to stay, Gilbert said.

Virtual outreach has several advantages, she noted. Back when she was doing intakes in person, getting honest answers could be difficult. “A lot of the times I was getting hesitant answers,” Gilbert said. “Or I would get no response, or I would get a lie.”

Online, she said, applicants often are more forthcoming about their circumstances than they are in person. Sometimes youth are nervous or embarrassed to go into an agency to ask for help, REACH manager Isakson said. The online form “totally took away that kind of power imbalance.”

Plus, Isakson added, youth can fill out the form at night or on weekends, instead of having to show up for a two-hour meeting during business hours. And they don’t have to figure out transportation, which poses another barrier for many people experiencing homelessness.

Despite these advantages, a lack of steady or reliable internet access can be a barrier for those seeking help remotely, Gilbert acknowledged. But she said youth are skilled at finding ways to get online. “They will sit at Starbucks, and they will do whatever they need to do to get the support that they need, because they’re so resilient,” she said.

When needed, the seven outreach specialists in REACH’s ACT program still meet young people face to face. This hybrid approach is critical because not all youth prefer virtual communication.

Vy Vu, the ACT program’s first youth “lived-expert” peer outreach specialist who had recently experienced homelessness, is one.

Vu, 22, left an abusive home shortly before turning 18. Vu, who identifies as nonbinary, said they never felt accepted by their family. Queer and trans young adults experience homelessness at twice the rate of their non-LGBTQ peers, according to [research by Chapin Hall](#). A 2020 national survey by the [Trevor Project](#) found that 29% of LGBTQ youth and young adults had experienced homelessness, been kicked out of their home or run away.

Vu had been living in their 2006 Toyota Camry on and off for about three years and were anxious to get into housing when they reached out to the ACT program last summer. Yet Vu found trying to collaborate with an ACT outreach specialist via phone and text frustratingly slow. “Talking,” face to face, Vu said, “you can get things done a lot faster.”

Last August, Vu signed a lease on the first place they could find, a one-bedroom apartment for \$1,450 a month. REACH, using state and private grants, cut the landlord a check for about \$1,800 to cover the security deposit and first month's rent. Around the same time, Vu started their job with ACT, which allows them to pay the full rent themselves.

Despite their own preference for in-person help, Vu said a lot of their peers prefer texting because they feel anxious speaking with strangers and uncomfortable asking for help. For others, Vu added, work and child care obligations, transportation challenges and the daily uncertainties and stresses of living without stable housing also make it hard to show up for an appointment. "You adapt to your participant, and that's how it should be," Vu said.

In Colorado, The Place also found that face-to-face interactions can play an important role in getting kids off the street.

During the first year of the pandemic, The Place served 20% fewer youth and young adults in its street outreach and in its 20-bed emergency shelter, according to Kemppainen, the organization's executive director. With libraries, youth-friendly coffee shops and other safe indoor spaces closed, she said, the need for a drop-in center where youth could come inside, get a meal, charge their phone and connect with a case manager became more urgent.

So The Place repurposed a nearby LGBTQ center that had ceased in-person activities to pilot a homeless youth drop-in center from December 2020 through March 2021.

Having that point of contact with young people proved critical in getting them housed, Kemppainen said. Compared with the previous year, the nonprofit saw six times the number of youth exit the street to housing because they were able to get to know drop-in center staff, who could sign them up for one of several housing programs.

That success helped accelerate the creation of a permanent drop-in center last December, something The Place had been wanting to do for several years. "The pandemic lit a fire under the need for opening a drop-in center," Kemppainen said.

The Place also is building a larger emergency shelter and 50 units of permanent supportive housing for young adults. "The pandemic really brought the need for housing even more into focus," Kemppainen said. [National research](#) shows that 35% of youth and young adults who applied for housing were offered a place; those who were selected waited an average of four months or more for the offer.

A car instead of a computer

When Gov. Jay Inslee ordered all Washington schools to close in an effort to slow COVID-19's spread, Julie Easley was alarmed. "I was, like, 'No! I need to get to my kids,'" said Easley, referring to those she had served as the sole outreach specialist at [The Coffee Oasis](#) in Tacoma. The nonprofit conducts homeless youth outreach and has drop-in centers and 18 emergency shelter beds for youth and young adults in Kitsap and Pierce counties.

"I have youth that were already having so many obstacles," she continued, "so much instability." Then they were being told to quarantine, Easley said, but often they didn't have a safe place to stay. Some, for example, were living in cars, while others found themselves no longer welcome at the places where they had been couch surfing.

Like Gilbert at REACH, Easley was abruptly unable to connect with her clients at libraries, drop-in centers, basketball courts and other regular haunts. And Easley knew that school is where many youth get meals and counseling and make important connections with friends, teachers and other stable adults.

When it became clear that life would not return to normal after the initial, two-week lockdown, Easley knew she would have to figure out alternative means of contacting her clients.

Easley turned to her car instead of a computer. Starting with the youth she already knew, she began providing food, clothing, personal protective equipment and other essentials.

“I’m still here, and I can still drive, and we still have supplies, and, so, let’s figure this out,” she told herself. “I’ll admit,” she added, “I didn’t really have, like, some master plan.”

Word quickly spread. When Easley would meet a kid in her compact car to shuttle them to a food bank, they often would have three friends in tow.

"I have times where we had so much food in the trunk, and the kids would have boxes on their laps, and we would bring them to grandmas that were taking care of them ... and to families that were letting them couch surf," Easley said. Those visits also let her get to know and support relatives of youth.

Easley said she worried more about the youth than about COVID. “Not because I didn’t want to be safe and protect others,” she said, “but I really needed to engage the youth with where they were at.”

For those living with a vulnerable grandparent, she would drop food off at the doorstep and chat outdoors from a distance. As masks became more available, she always carried and offered them to her clients, but she didn’t force the issue.

“Overall, my love for the youth won over my concern for COVID,” she said.

Easley's caseload ballooned to 80 teens, up from 55 prepandemic. She drove them to court hearings and doctor's appointments and helped them register for school. She has been by the sides of two 17-year-old clients through their pregnancies, attending medical appointments and ultrasounds but, because of COVID, she wasn't able to be at their babies' births.

Such "mobile case management," as Easley calls it, has allowed her to build trust with youth and with their families by supporting them through important life events. They have continued to reach out when challenges have arisen, including when they have had a car accident or received an eviction notice.

Last March, Easley became director of Pierce County youth programs at The Coffee Oasis.. A recent grant will allow her to add three new outreach workers, and she plans to have them continue the intensive in-person model she pioneered.

Trusting youth

Another change accelerated by the pandemic involves giving cash to young people and trusting them to spend it on whatever they need.

During the pandemic, REACH began giving young people one-time amounts up to \$250 for necessities such as food, transportation and personal hygiene. Youth tell REACH what they want the money for, but they don't have to provide a receipt or otherwise prove how they spent it. Most requests are for about \$50. "It changed the game for us," Isakson said. It allows staff to serve more youth because they're not spending two hours meeting one person to buy them groceries.

It also empowers young people, she and Gilbert added. Young adults “still have the right to make their own decisions,” Gilbert said. “And we trust that the youth, the young adults, are going to do what they need to do.”

A young person might be afraid to say they need \$50 for HIV prevention medication and instead say it's for gas, Gilbert said. "That's not my place to judge," she said. "I just want to make sure your needs are met."

In New York City, San Francisco, Oakland and Los Angeles, another new cash transfer program is testing whether giving young adults \$1,250 per month — an amount that reflects the cost of housing, usually with

a roommate, in those cities — will result in long-term housing stability for 30 to 100 participants in each city. Called the [Trust Youth Initiative](#), the program will provide the cash, along with optional support services, for up to two years. Point Source Youth is overseeing implementation, and Chapin Hall will evaluate the results.

The effort, Point Source Youth's Cohen pointed out, costs considerably less than housing young adults in congregate shelters. New York City spent more than [\\$50,000](#) per shelter bed in fiscal year 2021.

“We have to trust young people as experts in their own lives,” Cohen said. And given that youth of color and LGBTQ+ youth are so overrepresented among the homeless population, “it quickly becomes trust Black youth, trust trans youth, trust BIPOC youth,” he said. “That is what’s morally required.”

Such cash transfers have been rare in the United States, although [research](#) has shown them to be successful at alleviating poverty in other countries. That’s partly because government and private grants to nonprofits typically limit how funds can be used and require careful tracking of how they are spent.

The stimulus money that all Americans received during the pandemic helped shift the conversation among funders, Cohen said. No one, he pointed out, asked people, “Did you buy Chardonnay with your stimulus payment?” And those payments [worked](#) to improve people’s ability to afford food, rent and other necessities, while reducing depression and anxiety.

The Trust Youth Initiative is funded by a combination of state, local and foundation dollars. In Washington state, one of REACH’s private funders gave the organization permission to use an existing grant for the cash transfers; the group hopes to continue them as long as funding is available.

REACH and other groups say philanthropies not only boosted their giving during the pandemic, but also trusted service providers to spend it in ways that best help young people, often with young people’s input. REACH, for example, was able to use some emergency funds to hire a recent program graduate, Vu, to guide other struggling young people their own age.

Even when the emergency funding dries up, said Isakson, REACH is determined to stay relevant and accessible to the young people it serves. “We really just don’t want to be that antiquated model of a social service agency,” she said.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Omicron subvariant gains in Europe
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/europe/omicron-subvariant-ba-2.html
GIST	<p>A subvariant that scientists believe is even more contagious than the most common form of Omicron is spreading rapidly in parts of Asia and Europe and is now dominant in Denmark, where nearly all Covid restrictions were lifted last week.</p> <p>For now, scientists are not expecting the subvariant, known as BA.2, to do significantly more damage than the version of Omicron that remains dominant in the rest of the world, BA.1. But they are concerned that BA.2 could extend the global Omicron surge, because it seems to be even more infectious than BA.1, which was already extremely contagious. The subvariant has been documented in at least 57 countries.</p> <p>“This may mean higher peak infections in places that have yet to peak, and a slowdown in the downward trends in places that have already experienced peak Omicron,” Thomas Peacock, a virologist at Imperial College London, told The New York Times recently.</p> <p>BA.2 doesn’t appear to cause more severe disease than BA.1, and vaccines are just as effective against it as they are against other forms of Omicron, Dr. Boris Pavlin, an epidemiologist at the World Health Organization, said at a news briefing last week.</p>

One unanswered question is whether an infection from BA.1 builds immunity against infection from BA.2. Even if it does, [scientists have cautioned that the protection](#) from any previous coronavirus infection [may wane over time](#), and [may not apply as well to future versions of the virus](#).

BA.1 is still accounting for the vast majority of new Omicron cases around the world: 96.4 percent of them as of Jan. 31, according to the [World Health Organization](#) and the Global Initiative on Sharing All Influenza Data. But genetic sequencing indicates that BA.2 is quickly gaining ground, and it is expected to soon be dominant among new cases in India, Nepal, the Philippines, Qatar [and other nations](#).

BA.2 already makes up about two-thirds of new cases in Denmark, the Statens Serum Institut, the country's public health agency, recently [reported](#), and is expected to account for nearly 100 percent of cases there by mid-February. Denmark has an extensive [coronavirus surveillance system](#) that scientists around the world watch for signals of where the pandemic could be headed.

Despite record hospitalizations and the uncertainty around BA.2, governments in Denmark and some other European nations are moving quickly to end pandemic protocols, betting that their highly vaccinated populations [can endure the rest of the Omicron wave and whatever comes next](#).

On Monday, Portugal stopped requiring fully vaccinated travelers from abroad to show a negative test result, though unvaccinated visitors will still need to show one.

Norway has asked workers to return to their offices and has lifted limits on serving alcohol. The Netherlands is relaxing restrictions it adopted in December, which were among the strictest in the bloc. And Austria, which is [making vaccinations mandatory](#) for nearly all adults, has [ended its lockdown for unvaccinated people](#).

Outside the European Union, Britain has scrapped most of the remaining [pandemic restrictions in England](#). On Jan. 19, the country's [Health Security Agency](#) designated BA.2 a "variant under investigation," meaning it warrants more study but isn't yet seen as a greater threat than BA.1. BA.2 still accounts for only a small share of new cases in England, but it is spreading rapidly there and is suspected of driving a surge in [Northern Ireland](#).

In the United States, Trevor Bedford, a virologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, has [estimated](#) that about 8 percent of new cases are BA.2 and that the figure is climbing fast.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Arizona AG: border surge an 'invasion'
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/7/mark-brnovich-arizona-ag-rules-border-surge-invasi/
GIST	<p>Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich issued an official opinion Monday saying the surge of illegal immigrants coming across the border meets the legal definition of an "invasion" under the U.S. Constitution.</p> <p>Mr. Brnovich's ruling is only on the legal situation. He said it's up to Gov. Doug Ducey to make the actual determination, which would allow the state to "defend itself" under Article I, Section 10 of the founding document.</p> <p>"The on-the-ground violence and lawlessness at Arizona's border caused by cartels and gangs is extensive, well-documented, and persistent. It can satisfy the definition of 'actually invaded' and 'invasion' under the U.S. Constitution," the Republican attorney general wrote in his opinion.</p> <p>The ruling was requested by a member of the state assembly.</p> <p>Mr. Brnovich's opinion is the latest salvo in a war of rhetoric over how bad the border has gotten under President Biden.</p>

	<p>The president and most of his team have refused to label the record surge of people and drugs a “crisis,” much less an invasion.</p> <p>But sheriffs on the border, and elected officials of both parties, say “crisis” undersells what they’re seeing, and some cities on the border have declared states of emergency over having to handle the massive numbers.</p> <p>Mr. Brnovich’s opinion elevates the matter to one of constitutional proportions.</p> <p>He said the key sections are Article IV, Section 4, which requires the government to guarantee each state a republican form of government and to “protect each of them against invasion,” and Article I, Section 10, which bars states from raising armies or engaging in war “unless actually invaded.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Federal workforce ‘model’ for pro-union
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/7/white-house-proposes-ways-bolster-unions-federal-w/
GIST	<p>The White House on Monday proposed ways to bolster union strength in the federal workforce and support private-sector workers looking to organize as President Biden draws a straight line between the labor movement and America’s history and economic progress.</p> <p>The White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment, which is chaired by Vice President Kamala Harris and co-chaired by Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, detailed 70 recommendations that can be acted on without Congress.</p> <p>Mr. Biden accepted the recommendations, which call on the federal workforce to serve as a “model-actor” for pro-union behavior.</p> <p>The task force wants federal employers to inform new hires about their right to organize, to facilitate communication between unions and workers, and to encourage federal workers who haven’t unionized to set up bargaining units, including wildland firefighters who work for the U.S. Forest Service.</p> <p>“While some past administrations have taken individual actions to empower workers and strengthen their rights, the Biden-Harris administration will be the first to take a comprehensive approach to doing so with the existing authority of the executive branch,” the report said.</p> <p>“Our goal is not just to facilitate worker power through executive action — it is to model practices that can be followed by state and local governments, private sector employers, and others,” the Biden team wrote.</p> <p>The Biden administration said it realizes union participation is at its nadir. Only 10.3% of the U.S. workforce was represented by a union last year, down from more than 30% in the 1950s, the report said.</p> <p>But Mr. Biden believes there is a window to rejuvenate the labor movement.</p> <p>A recent Gallup poll found 68% of Americans approve of unions, the highest level since 1965, and a growing number of Starbucks coffee employees are generating buzz with their moves to unionize shops around the country. The John Deere company faced a prominent labor strike and Mr. Biden backed Amazon workers looking to unionize in Alabama.</p> <p>Workers are also rethinking their careers or leveraging pandemic upheaval to their advantage, as employers clamor to fill labor gaps.</p> <p>“Workers today are demanding more from their jobs, and we know the freedom to exercise their right to collective bargaining is a key component of our efforts to improve working conditions across the economy,” Mr. Walsh said.</p>

The Labor Department said workers should understand their right to unionize, and it wants to protect workers who face retaliation for organizing. It will also shed light on employers' use of anti-union consultants and produce reports on how unions bolster the U.S. economy.

"The report's recommendations put the federal government's policy of encouraging worker organizing and collective bargaining front and center, and empowers workers to build a stronger economy and better quality of life for them and their families," Mr. Walsh said.

The task force is required to report on progress in implementing the recommendations in six months.

Monday's report comes as Mr. Biden — who often characterizes himself as a hardscrabble guy from Scranton, Pennsylvania — is increasingly vocal about support for labor unions and their role in society.

"I tell you who built America: the middle class. And the people who built the middle class are organized labor — unions. Unions did it," Mr. Biden said Friday as he signed an order requiring labor agreements for large federal projects.

"That's not hyperbole. That's a fact. That's a straight fact," he said.

Efforts to promote unions through administrative action come as legislative efforts stall in Congress.

The House passed the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, or PRO Act, which would expand protections for workers who want to unionize, but it cannot make it through the evenly divided Senate because of filibuster rules.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Macron, Putin talks fail to achieve progress
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/07/macron-warns-dont-expect-miracles-in-talks-with-putin-over-ukraine
GIST	<p>Emmanuel Macron and Vladimir Putin did not appear to reach a breakthrough in marathon talks at the Kremlin on Monday evening aimed at fending off a Russian attack on Ukraine.</p> <p>After five hours of negotiations, Macron warned that the two sides needed to work quickly to avoid the risk of an escalation.</p> <p>"Right now the tension is increasing and the risk of destabilisation is increasing," Macron said, according to a simultaneous translation of his remarks following the talks. "Neither Russia, nor the Europeans want chaos or instability, when nations have already suffered from the [coronavirus] epidemic. So we need to agree on concrete measures."</p> <p>Macron is due to travel to Kyiv on Tuesday, where he will hold talks with the president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy. He said he plans to brief Putin on the results of the discussions in a phone call.</p> <p>It is not clear how Macron's shuttle diplomacy can satisfy Russia's demands that Ukraine membership in Nato be ruled out while maintaining that the alliance's open door policy is "existential for Europe", as he said in opening remarks.</p> <p>There were some signs of progress from the talks, which were held over a seven-course dinner that included rebo and chardonnay from a Russian winery.</p> <p>Without going into specifics, Putin said it was possible to consider "a number of [Macron's] proposals and ideas ... in order to lay a foundation for our further steps."</p>

But he also blasted Nato's open door policy, saying it only benefited the United States. He also appeared to be needling Ukraine's Zelenskiy by saying that Russia was ready to offer political asylum to his rival Petro Poroshenko, who has been [charged with treason over his alleged involvement with financing Moscow-backed separatists](#).

"I believe [Poroshenko's] made a lot of mistakes," Putin said. "And yet I believe his prosecution for treason is excessive by the incumbent leadership. We stand ready to grant such people as Mr Poroshenko asylum in Russia."

As the two met, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said that Putin had "added to his force capability along that border with Ukraine and in Belarus". US officials have said that Russia already has more than 70% of the troops it would need to launch an attack on Ukraine, and some analysts have said they believe the Kremlin is buying time for its buildup in its negotiations with western leaders.

Macron had warned against expecting "miracles" in his talks with [Vladimir Putin](#).

The French president [had been upbeat](#) about the chances of finding a compromise over European security that would persuade Putin not to order an invasion but, on arrival in Moscow on Monday, Macron sought to play down expectations.

"We can prevent some things in the short term," he said in Moscow, but added: "I don't think there are short-term victories.

"I don't believe in spontaneous miracles. There is lots of tensions, nervousness," Macron added.

Before the high-stakes meeting, Moscow had also sought to temper expectations.

"The situation is too complex to expect decisive breakthroughs in the course of one meeting," said Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov. "In recent days there has been nothing new on the topic of security guarantees for Russia, our western interlocutors prefer not to mention this topic."

Macron's meeting with Putin was part of a frenetic day of diplomacy under the shadow of a possible new war in Europe. Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, was meeting Joe Biden at the White House and the country's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, was in Kyiv, assuring the Ukrainian government of support. Meanwhile, the US and the EU held talks in Washington on how to keep energy supplies flowing to Europe if Russia turned off the flow of natural gas.

After their White House meeting, Biden and Scholz presented a united front in threatening sanctions in the event of a Russian attack. But while Biden was adamant that the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany would be shut down, Scholz would not be so specific.

"If Russia invades – that means tanks or troops crossing the border of Ukraine again – then there will no longer be a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it," Biden said.

Scholz said that the US and Germany would be "absolutely united" on sanctions, he would not pledge Nord Stream 2 would be closed, insisting on some ambiguity.

"It is part of the process that we do not spell out everything in public, because Russia could understand that there might be even more to come," the German chancellor said.

Asked about the likelihood of Putin ordering an invasion, Biden replied: "I know that he's in a position now to be able to invade, almost assuming that the ground is frozen above Kyiv. He has the capacity to do that. What he's going to do I don't know."

The president said that it would be a "gigantic mistake" for Putin to attack, but he advised US civilians to leave Ukraine, saying: "I don't want them to get caught in the crossfire."

Josep Borrell, the EU foreign policy chief, led the European delegation to Washington to discuss emergency energy supplies to the continent if the pipeline running through Ukraine was severed.

“We are living by understanding the most dangerous moment for the security in Europe after the end of the cold war,” Borrell said, giving a new estimate of the Russian military buildup.

“Nobody masses 140,000 heavily armed soldiers on the border of a country, at the same time [as questioning] the independence to this country in a way that certainly represents a strong threat,” Borrell said, adding that the Russian troops were not there “to have tea”.

He said that European gas prices were already six to 10 times higher than a year ago, adding urgency to the need to diversify energy sources.

“When Russia halted gas supplies over a dispute with Ukraine in 2009, people died from the cold. And when energy supplies fail, economies falter,” the US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, said.

“We’re determined to prevent that from happening and to mitigate the impact on energy supplies and prices should Russia choose to cut natural gas supplies to Europe more than it already has.”

The US and EU are trying to secure short-notice deliveries of liquified natural gas (LNG) and agreements to pool reserves in the face of limits on the supply for the east, as well as LNG supply and infrastructure constraints that make it very hard to make up the shortfall.

“It’s clear that from the general nature of the comments from secretary Blinken and high commissioner Burrell that they’re still scrambling in terms of their response to this situation,” said Duncan Wood, vice-president for strategy and new initiatives and the Wilson Center thinktank.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Russians on military buildup Ukraine border
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/07/we-dont-ask-questions-locals-fear-russias-military-buildup-on-ukraine-border
GIST	<p>The military train lurched into the rail depot at Kursk on a recent afternoon, carrying more snow-dusted main battle tanks, self-propelled artillery, and other heavy weapons to within a few hours’ drive by car of the Ukrainian border.</p> <p>At the depot, the flatbed railcars parked between heavy containers carrying chemical products, leaving them visible only from a small pedestrian footbridge overhead. There, military police with red armbands kept watch as locals looked on curiously at the latest arrivals in Russia’s vast military buildup.</p> <p>A recent trip by the Guardian to the Voronezh and Kursk regions in Russia found a hive of barely hidden military activity as Russian troops continued to position themselves for a potential assault on Ukraine, with the latest reports stating that personnel are being transferred and troops are leaving larger depots for forward staging areas just miles from the border.</p> <p>As fears grew in the west of a possible Russian military incursion, world leaders on Monday met in a flurry of diplomatic activity: Emmanuel Macron headed to Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin, Joe Biden hosted the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, in Washington DC and a European delegation was in Kyiv. In the UK, the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, announced a further 350 troops to Poland as 1,700 US paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne also arrived in the Nato member amid concerns the Ukraine crisis could spill over.</p> <p>On the ground in Kursk and Voronezh, which each sit about 100 miles from the border with Ukraine, the heightened Russian military activity has become increasingly impossible to ignore. As jets roared overhead last week during a military training exercise, locals in Shilovo, a district of Voronezh, were</p>

stunned to see a Pantsir air defence missile system emerge into a snowy field right next to the local primary school. (The western military district announced that it was just a training exercise.)

In the nearby suburb of Maslovka, months of offloading of tanks, artillery and other equipment at a railway station has put local residents on edge.

“My wife came back from her errands yelling about tanks, tanks, tanks,” said Oleg Romanenko, a mechanic and metal shop worker who lives near a main street in Maslovka, named for the 206th Rifle Division that fought in the second world war. “It is hard to walk outside your home and see this and not think a war could happen. Everyone has thought about it, at least.”

Videos have begun surfacing of trains carrying Russian troops toward the front, and flight data suggests that troops from Siberia are also being airlifted towards Ukraine. Near the Kursk rail depot, air force officers cycled through a nearby spa hotel, while national guard military convoys seen as potential follow-on forces have been spotted driving through nearby towns as they make their way toward the border.

Nonetheless, most of the activity points to the grand scope of Russia’s buildup, where an estimated half of the country’s battalion tactical groups has been moved to staging grounds within striking distance of Ukraine, sometimes just dozens of kilometres away from the border. US officials think that Russia has 70% of the necessary military equipment already positioned in order to launch an attack.

“All of our red flags or checkboxes have been ticked in the past couple of weeks,” said a researcher from the open-source Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), which has tracked Russian military deployments towards Ukraine. Those include the 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade, which departed its base above the Arctic Circle last month and which may have been the unit whose arrival was observed by the Guardian.

The CIT researcher said their red flags include the movement of airborne troops and national guard troops, and the recent movement of equipment from a large military encampment in the town of Yelnya – he called it an “Oh crap” moment.

“The evidence we have strongly suggests that literally every large ground formation of the Russian armed forces is involved in this,” the researcher said. “That’s literally unprecedented,” at least since the Soviet Union, they added.

Despite the warning signs, some locals in Maslovka still view the buildup with an air of disregard. Videos of tanks and other weaponry arriving at the railway began to emerge in March and since then many have been convinced that the movement of heavy weaponry is just a defensive posture or a ploy in a high-stakes negotiation with the west.

“We’ve got used to it here,” said Marina, a pensioner who was waiting at a bus stop off of the main street. She declined to give a surname. “[Troops] arrive and then in a few days they are gone again. Sometimes you see a few men in uniform. But we generally don’t [interfere], don’t ask questions. These are these kinds of times.”

Security has certainly tightened since spring, when a Sky News crew managed to walk on to a new base in the Voronezh region being established for the arriving troops. Now, roads to large encampments in the area have been blocked off, locals said. And CIT researchers said that Russian railways had made it more difficult to track train data, increasing the importance of social media video uploaded to platforms like TikTok.

Several people in Maslovka said there had been informal warnings not to speak with media or outsiders about the buildup or movements of military vehicles. At a local grocery store, a shopkeeper shrugged when asked about the tanks that would have been parked 50 metres from her door a few days earlier. “I don’t know anything about that,” she said pointedly and moved into the back of the store.

	<p>The neighbouring region of Kursk, which until recently had seen relatively little military activity, now had “a massive influx of vehicles and personnel,” wrote Konrad Muzyka in an examination of satellite photography of the region taken earlier this month. Videos taken from social media on Monday showed more tanks being transported south of Kursk by rail toward the border.</p> <p>Analysts said that an attack from this area could threaten the city of Kharkiv just across the border or could continue on to either cut off Ukrainian troops in the east or toward the capital of Kyiv.</p> <p>Kursk is historically associated with one of the largest and bloodiest tank battles of the second world war and some locals said it was unthinkable to imagine being on the frontline of a new conflict.</p> <p>“Everyone is interconnected, especially because of our family ties across the border,” said Larisa Kholobina, the director of a local museum that focuses on preserving the memory of children who fought in the second world war. “There has been this [difficult] period ... But we hope that things calm down.”</p> <p>“It’s just a few hundred kilometres from here” to the border, an assistant added. “We try not to think about it but we know that a war would touch us here too.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Pentagon: Taiwan upgrade Patriot missiles
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/08/us-approves-100m-deal-for-taiwan-to-upgrade-patriot-missile-system
GIST	<p>The United States has approved a possible \$100m sale of equipment and services to Taiwan to “sustain, maintain, and improve” the Patriot missile defense system used by the self-ruled island claimed by China, the Pentagon said.</p> <p>A statement from the US defence security cooperation agency on Monday said it had delivered the required certification notifying Congress after state department approval for the sale, which was requested by Taiwan’s de facto embassy in Washington.</p> <p>Upgrades to the Patriot air defence system would “help improve the security of the recipient and assist in maintaining political stability, military balance, economic and progress in the region”, DSCA said in a statement.</p> <p>“This proposed sale serves US national, economic, and security interests by supporting the recipient’s continuing efforts to modernise its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability,” the agency said.</p> <p>The main contractors would be Raytheon Technologies and Lockheed Martin, it said.</p> <p>Taiwan’s defence ministry has said the decision to obtain newer Patriot missiles was made during a 2019 meeting with US officials in the administration of president Donald Trump.</p> <p>The democratically governed island has complained of repeated missions by China’s air force in its air defence zone, part of what Washington sees as Beijing’s effort to pressure Taipei into accepting its sovereignty.</p> <p>The United States, like most countries, does not have official relations with Taiwan, but Washington is its biggest backer and is bound by law to provide it with means to defend itself.</p> <p>US officials have been pushing Taiwan to modernise its military so it can become a “porcupine”, hard for China to attack, and such arms sales always anger China.</p> <p>China’s ambassador to the United States said last month that the two super powers could end up in a military conflict if Washington encourages Taiwan’s independence.</p>

HEADLINE	02/07 Homeless deaths surges dramatically
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/07/homelessness-is-lethal-deaths-have-risen-dramatically
GIST	<p>The number of Americans dying while homeless has surged dramatically in the past five years, an exclusive analysis by the Guardian in conjunction with an academic expert at the University of Washington has shown.</p> <p>An examination of 20 US urban areas found the number of deaths among people living without housing shot up by 77% in the five years ending in 2020.</p> <p>The rise from 2016 through 2020 was driven by many factors, including ever-rising numbers of people living on the street and the growing dangers they face, such as violence, untreated disease and increasingly deadly illicit drug supplies.</p> <p>From 65-year-old Randy Ferris, killed when a car veered into a California sidewalk encampment, Justine Belovoskey, 60, who died alone in a tent during a Texas cold snap, and Anthony Denico Williams, stabbed to death at age 20 in Washington DC, to scores of young people succumbing to overdoses on the streets, their stories reflect the harrowing tragedy of an epidemic of homelessness.</p> <p>“People who die while experiencing homelessness are some of the most neglected in society,” said Matt Fowle, University of Washington researcher and co-creator of the organization Homeless Deaths Count. “These are folks who most need our help and are least likely to receive it.”</p> <p>Coronavirus was just one more hazard people struggling on the streets and in shelters faced in the last two years.</p> <p>While the federal government makes no effort to count deaths nationally of people deemed homeless, the Guardian worked with Fowle to collect local data from large urban areas, where consistent year-to-year counts were available. The stark results stretch from Los Angeles and Seattle to New York, Philadelphia and Miami, via the heartland.</p> <p>The Guardian’s analysis counted 18,000 people who died homeless over five years in encampments, on sidewalks or in shelters, including 5,000 deaths in 2020 alone. In most cases, the deaths were tracked by county coroners and medical examiners, but in a few locations only local non-profits kept track.</p> <p>Experts at the non-profit National Health Care for the Homeless Council say that, in many places, the people who perish without housing are never counted. They estimate the total number of deaths is actually between 17,000 and 40,000 every year.</p> <p>“Every person and every life matters,” said the council’s Katherine Cavanaugh. “That’s part of why we are encouraging people to just track these deaths. We want to make sure that we can use that information to improve situations for people in the future and not have these deaths be happening in vain.”</p> <p>In all but two of the 20 cities or counties examined by the Guardian, numbers rose significantly over five years. For instance, the homeless death toll in Los Angeles almost doubled to more than 1,600 in 2020 from 871 in 2016, while New York’s total more than doubled to 685 from 290.</p> <p>In places that listed causes of death, the most prevalent have plagued homeless populations for years: drug overdoses, violence, traffic deaths and premature lethality of treatable conditions like heart disease. Only New York and Los Angeles noted a large number of deaths caused by Covid-19.</p> <p>The overall jump in deaths may reflect both increases in the sheer number of unhoused people but also, disproportionately, the growing dangers they face.</p>

The annual count of the nation's homeless population was [postponed in 2021](#) due to the pandemic, but counts for previous years showed a disheartening trend: after declining for years, the homeless population increased steadily between 2016 and 2020.

And more people who find themselves without a home are living outside, in unsheltered conditions, a factor that was exacerbated by shelter closures in the pandemic. They also suffer the toll of increasingly deadly synthetic street drugs, including fentanyl.

Many may have faced the kind of societal headwinds encountered by 26-year-old Christopher Madson-Yamasaki of Oregon, a bright, aspiring renewable energy technician with a mischievous grin, who had struggled with schizoaffective disorder since his teenage years, his family said.

He had become addicted to methamphetamines, after falling off his medication routine and self-medicating. He and his mother repeatedly sought to get him treatment around Portland. But in the end, there were no doors open for him.

He was found in a tent on 27 February 2020, dead of a meth overdose and with all his valuables stolen from him, days after being kicked out of a shelter for smoking on a balcony, according to his mother, Hope Yamasaki.

Yamasaki told the Guardian how Christopher fell through the cracks.

She described how he had repeatedly been turned away from drug treatment centers, because they couldn't handle those with mental illness, and from mental health programs, because they couldn't take those with addiction problems. When he turned 26, Madson-Yamasaki no longer qualified for youth programs that had previously provided housing.

"And he didn't make it to 27," said his mother. "This is so hard to talk about, but it's so important. So many members of our community are dehumanized for mental health and addiction issues. They matter."

Officials of Multnomah county, which provides health services for Madson-Yamasaki's region, held a press conference featuring his story to highlight the need for more specialized treatment, which they hope to provide with recently approved new funding.

"We know that there is a lot more to be done," said the Multnomah county chair, Deborah Kafoury.

People without a home face three times the risk of death of the general population, according to a local analysis of 2017 to 2019 deaths by Los Angeles county health department's center for health impact evaluation. It found homeless people in LA were 35 times more likely to die of drug or alcohol overdose, 16 times more likely to die of traffic-related injuries, such as being hit by a car, and 14 times more likely to be the victim of homicide.

In 2020, drug overdose deaths were the top cause of death among homeless people in every urban area that reported causes.

"It's deadlier to have a substance use disorder now," said Liz Hersh, director of Philadelphia's office of homeless services, who said fentanyl, which is as much as 100 times as potent as heroin, is a huge driver of increased overdose deaths.

Methamphetamine was also a factor in many deaths.

Jennifer Vines, health officer of Multnomah county, said people living outside sometimes report taking the stimulant at night because they fear violence.

“We often hear anecdotally that people will start using meth as a way of staying alert to protect themselves and their belongings,” she said. “And then, the flip side of that is it can also lead to psychosis and erratic and violent behavior.”

Hersh of Philadelphia, where homeless deaths doubled over five years, also noted rising trends in overdoses and violence since coronavirus arrived, even though its homeless population decreased.

“We’re seeing some of the frustration and rage that the pandemic has engendered,” she said. “People are despairing.”

In Las Vegas on 13 July 2020, Brent Michael Lloyd, 48 and unhoused, was shot in the head while he slept outside, in what police described as a “thrill killing”.

Anthony Denico Williams, 20, lost his mother to cancer at age 16 and ended up regularly sleeping under the neoclassical arches of Washington DC’s Union station railway hub.

He dreamed of opening a home for youth in need. Asked what he would do with three wishes, he said he’d want “a house over my head, to be able to give back to others and to have a nice job, that’s it”.

Instead Williams was knifed to death 26 January 2020, in an altercation over a drug sale.

A friend, social worker Grace McKinnon, told a local TV station that his death seemed senseless.

“So young, he still had his life ahead of him. And for it to end like this, I don’t know if there’s meaning in that.”

Homeless people are at greater risk of being hit by cars, according to numerous officials, particularly where large numbers are living under bridges or beside freeway off-ramps.

Randy Ferris, a Vietnam war veteran, was one of three men killed on 15 March 2021 when a driver veered into an encampment under a San Diego bridge.

Amber Joseph, who recently got housing, spoke at a memorial about how Ferris had helped her navigate living on the streets.

“He was like a big brother to me. He kept a close eye on me,” the Times of San Diego reported her saying.

Deaths from exposure make up a relatively small fraction of reported deaths, according to several homelessness experts, perhaps because the coldest cities have programs to get people indoors in winter.

But Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento regional coalition to end homelessness, said his normally temperate area of northern California, where 70% of the homeless population live outside, has seen more people dying of hypothermia in unusual weather events.

“I think it’s just so many more people outside exposed to the elements,” he said. “And the elements are somewhat more unpredictable than they might have been in the past. Sadly, really terrible storms and fires are the new normal.”

The climate crisis is driving more extreme weather events across the US.

During the exceptional cold snap that gripped Texas last winter, leaving millions without power, Justine Belovoskey, 60, perished of hypothermia in her tent in a state-sanctioned homeless encampment on 15 February. She didn’t make it to a warming center with a diesel generator, according to the Texas Observer.

In Denver, Colorado, the cold certainly killed people living outside, but disease and injury caused more deaths, while drug overdoses far exceeded other causes, Axios reported, citing local reports.

Beyond the direct medical causes, factors such as widespread lack of affordable housing drive increases in homelessness and, ultimately, deaths, experts say.

Those jurisdictions that reported the genders of those who died typically found that about three-quarters were men. Racial trends were hard to establish, based on the few reports that included racial breakdowns.

Sacramento, California, for example, reported that 41% of those dying while homeless were people of color.

The average age of death for people without housing is low. Again in Sacramento county, for instance, it was 51 for men and 49 for women.

“Basically, on average, homelessness takes off 25% of a person’s life,” said Erlenbusch.

Preventable and treatable diseases, including heart disease and diabetes, are among the biggest causes of premature homeless deaths.

“People should be dying of these illnesses when they are 80, not when they’re 48,” said Margot Kushel, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of its center for vulnerable populations.

It may be some time before the true effects of Covid-19 on this population are known. The biggest surge in coronavirus deaths nationally didn’t come until January 2021, which isn’t yet included in most jurisdictions’ homelessness data.

New York City, which recently disclosed deaths among people experiencing homelessness for the fiscal year ending July 2020, found that there were 121 deaths from Covid-19, mostly among those living in city-funded shelters. That made Covid the second highest cause of the 613 recorded homeless deaths that year.

Los Angeles’s unhoused have suffered several hundred Covid deaths, Will Nicholas, director of LA county’s center for health impact evaluation, said preliminary figures suggested.

And the pandemic probably worsened overdose deaths across the board.

“It’s a sad situation,” Nicholas said.

Experts agreed that the best prescription is to house people.

“You cannot have a healthy society with this many people living on the economic and social margins,” said UCSF’s Kushel. “Homelessness is lethal. We’re not going to be able to solve this without solving homelessness.”

For UW researcher Fowle, who is working on a doctoral thesis about the crisis of US homeless deaths, it comes down to whether our society can muster the empathy to act.

“It’s a tragedy that people are dying without housing,” he said. “We know the solutions. Housing saves lives and, for these people, is often a form of healthcare.”

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HEADLINE	02/07 IRS to end controversial facial recognition
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/irs-to-end-use-of-facial-recognition-to-access-tax-accounts/

GIST	<p>The IRS will stop using controversial facial-recognition software for taxpayers trying to access online tax accounts over concerns about privacy and security.</p> <p>The transition from ID.me, the third-party verification system that required taxpayers to upload video selfies to access their tax information online, will begin in the coming weeks, the IRS said Monday. The IRS said it would add additional verification tools that don't involve facial recognition but didn't specify how those would work.</p> <p>The use of the software has been the subject of bipartisan criticism from lawmakers in recent weeks because of concerns about privacy as well as questions about racial bias embedded in the program.</p> <p>"The IRS takes taxpayer privacy and security seriously, and we understand the concerns that have been raised," IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig said in a statement Monday. "Everyone should feel comfortable with how their personal information is secured, and we are quickly pursuing short-term options that do not involve facial recognition."</p> <p>The IRS said the tax filing season, which began last month and runs until April 18 for most taxpayers, would not be hindered by the transition away from using ID.me.</p> <p>The decision was immediately praised by Senate Finance Chair Ron Wyden, who sent a letter to the IRS earlier Monday asking them to discontinue the use of the program.</p> <p>"I understand the transition process may take time, but I appreciate that the administration recognizes that privacy and security are not mutually exclusive and no one should be forced to submit to facial recognition to access critical government services," Wyden said in a statement after the IRS announcement.</p> <p>Several key Republican senators, including Mike Crapo, also had launched an inquiry into how the IRS was using ID.me.</p> <p>The IRS website last year began requiring taxpayers to use ID.me to access personalized information about eligibility for expanded child tax credits funded by President Joe Biden's pandemic relief program, the American Rescue Plan, among other services. The agency had planned to expand use of ID.me to all taxpayers later this year.</p> <p>Research has shown that AI-driven facial recognition software often makes mistakes with darker-skinned people. That identified bias in the technology has prompted activists to call for law enforcement agencies to abandon using it altogether.</p> <p>ID.me says it has verified the identities of some 70 million people. Those numbers grew rapidly as a result of its work for 27 states processing unemployment claims during the pandemic and helping combat fraud. Several other federal entities, including the Social Security Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs, also use the technology.</p> <p>But ID.me has faced complaints that its software has resulted in innocent claimants being flagged for fraud. Many users have also struggled with ID.me's process.</p> <p>The company, which has been criticized for not being transparent about what sort of facial recognition technology it uses, last month said it kept a database of users' images against which it compared new selfies. ID.me relies on controversial Amazon technology as part of its system.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Putin warns West; next move still a mystery
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/europe/putin-macron-russia-france-ukraine.html
GIST	MOSCOW — President Vladimir V. Putin said he was prepared to keep negotiating over Russia's security demands in Eastern Europe but offered a stark warning over the possibility of a full-scale war between

Russia and the West — using a five-hour meeting with his French counterpart on Monday to keep the world guessing about his intentions.

Mr. Putin said that proposals made by President Emmanuel Macron of [France](#) in their one-on-one meeting at the Kremlin were “too early to speak about” but could create “a foundation for our further steps.” Mr. Macron, in a joint news conference with Mr. Putin after their hastily scheduled meeting, described the coming days as potentially decisive in heading off what the West fears could be a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

“We are in a situation of extreme tension, a degree of incandescence that Europe has rarely known in the past decades,” Mr. Macron said.

The meeting came as [President Biden hosted Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany at the White House](#) to coordinate a trans-Atlantic response to a potential attack on Ukraine, underscoring the intense unease in the West touched off by Mr. Putin’s enormous troop buildup around Ukraine’s borders.

Mr. Biden said on Monday that Western countries would take a “united” approach to rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine, and he vowed that [a controversial gas pipeline project](#) designed to send gas from Russia to Germany would not go forward in the event of a military invasion.

Mr. Putin appeared to relish the attention — and signaled he was prepared to draw out the mystery around his next moves that has turned the Russian troop buildup into the West’s most urgent crisis. The Russian leader is an avid geopolitical tactician, and Monday’s concurrent talks in Moscow and in Washington showcased his ability to force the West to pay attention to the Kremlin’s longstanding grievances over NATO’s expansion to Russia’s borders.

But whether that attention will be enough to satisfy Mr. Putin is far from clear. Some analysts worry that his engagement in diplomacy in recent weeks is merely buying time for Russia’s military to make final preparations for an invasion.

Mr. Putin said Russia was still working on a new written response in its back-and-forth with [NATO](#) and the United States over the security architecture of Eastern Europe, predicting that the “dialogue” would continue even though he said the West had ignored Russia’s principal demands.

He told reporters at the Kremlin that if Ukraine were to join NATO — a scenario that Western officials characterize as a far-off possibility, but one that the Kremlin describes as an existential threat — a wider war would follow.

“Do you want France to go to war with Russia?” Mr. Putin said in answering a French reporter’s question, claiming that a NATO-allied Ukraine would seek to retake Crimea, the Ukrainian peninsula that Russia annexed in 2014. “That’s what will happen!”

Mr. Putin saved his greatest ire for President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. Asked whether Russia would invade Ukraine, Mr. Putin did not rule out the possibility. He insisted Mr. Zelensky needed to implement the peace plan negotiated in Minsk, Belarus, in 2015 — one that could give the Kremlin a way to influence Ukraine’s foreign-policy decisions.

“You may like it, you may not like it — deal with it, my gorgeous,” Mr. Putin said of Mr. Zelensky, repeating a crude Russian rhyme.

Mr. Macron was scheduled to fly to Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, on Tuesday to continue his shuttle diplomacy in a meeting with Mr. Zelensky. The French president has emerged as Europe’s main interlocutor with Mr. Putin in the crisis; the two have spoken on the phone five times since December, and Mr. Putin said they would speak again after Mr. Macron’s visit to Ukraine.

The two presidents' meeting Monday evening was unusual both for its duration and its format — the men spoke one-on-one, without aides in the room. They held a joint news conference that began at about midnight Moscow time.

Mr. Macron said he had coordinated closely with the Western allies, including the United States and Germany. But some supporters of Ukraine's pro-Western course have criticized him for being too solicitous of Mr. Putin's demands. Mr. Macron did nothing to assuage those concerns by telling reporters before his meeting with Mr. Putin that a "Finlandization" of Ukraine was "one of the models on the table."

The term alludes to how Finland, facing the Soviet Union during the Cold War, was able to maintain independence from its powerful neighbor and survive as a democracy on condition of strict neutrality. A "Finlandization" of Ukraine would imply that it would never join NATO and that Russia would exercise considerable influence over its political options.

Mr. Macron did not address the model in the news conference after Monday's meeting, but he emphasized his belief that Russia's concerns could be addressed without compromising core Western principles.

"Russia is European," Mr. Macron said. "Whoever believes in Europe must know how to work with Russia and find the ways and the means to construct the European future among Europeans."

Mr. Macron said both the West and Russia needed to get over the traumas of the past and build "useful solutions." He said the "first priority" of his visit was to secure military stability and avert war "in the short term." Discussions could then continue to build "medium-term solutions."

"Can NATO solve the whole question of our collective security?" Mr. Macron said. "I don't believe so."

The French president offered few details of his ideas, but said they would involve rethinking post-Cold War security arrangements because "there is no security for Europeans if there is not security for Russia."

Mr. Putin hinted that proposals were on the table that the two leaders were not disclosing publicly. "A number of his ideas or proposals — which it is probably too early to speak about — I see as rather feasible for creating a foundation for our further steps," Mr. Putin said.

Russia has amassed [a large military force near Ukraine's eastern, northern and southern borders](#) — about 130,000 troops, U.S. and Ukrainian officials say, in addition to tanks, antiaircraft batteries and other war matériel, and specialized units for supporting combat operations.

Biden administration officials [have warned for months](#) that Mr. Putin appeared to be preparing for an invasion, while at the same time acknowledging that his intentions aren't clear, and that he, himself, may not yet know what he will do. Russian officials insist there is no plan to invade.

"I don't know that he knows what he is going to do," Mr. Biden said of the Russian leader in his White House news conference on Monday alongside Mr. Scholz, the German chancellor. Mr. Biden added, "I have been very, very straightforward and blunt with President Putin both on the phone and in person: We will impose the most severe sanctions that have ever been imposed."

Given the threat of war, Mr. Biden advised American civilians in Ukraine to leave the country, adding that he would "hate to see them get caught in a crossfire if in fact they did invade."

Despite the insistence that NATO is united, Mr. Scholz has resisted pressure from the United States to take a hard line on Russia, refusing to send arms to Ukraine or to specify what economic sanctions Germany would impose. His vague stance has drawn criticism in Washington from Democrats and Republicans alike, and from [some in Germany](#).

But Mr. Biden batted away any suggestion that Mr. Scholz is seen as an unreliable ally. "There's no need to win back trust," he said. "He has the complete trust of the United States."

	<p>Germany depends heavily on oil and gas bought from Russia, and Nord Stream 2, an all-but-complete \$11 billion project, would significantly increase Russia's capacity to send gas to Western Europe.</p> <p>"If Russia invades, that means tanks and troops crossing the border of Ukraine again, then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2," Mr. Biden said. "We will bring an end to it."</p> <p>Yet even then, Mr. Scholz, in response to repeated questioning, would not agree explicitly with Mr. Biden that the project would be halted, saying only, "we are absolutely united."</p> <p>Since taking office in December, the chancellor has stayed out of the spotlight, letting Mr. Macron and others take the lead in diplomacy over Ukraine. He has only spoken to Mr. Putin once since taking office, and his meeting Monday with Mr. Biden was his first. But next week, he will visit Kyiv and Moscow.</p> <p>Mr. Biden said that the Germans supported a "strong package" of sanctions against Russia if Mr. Putin moves forward, but neither he nor Mr. Scholz detailed what those would be. In recent weeks, Mr. Biden has threatened severe economic sanctions against Russia's financial sector and members of Mr. Putin's inner circle if there is an invasion.</p> <p>"It is a good idea to say to our American friends: We will be united," Mr. Scholz said at their news conference, switching briefly from German to English. "We will act together, and we will take all the necessary steps and all the necessary steps will be done by both of us together."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 US: if Russia invades, no Nord Stream 2
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/us/politics/biden-olaf-scholz-russia.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — After meeting with the leader of Germany, President Biden said on Monday that a lucrative gas pipeline project connecting Russia and Germany would not go forward if Moscow were to invade Ukraine.</p> <p>Mr. Biden vowed that Germany and the United States would take a "united" approach to rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine, despite concerns that Germany has not been a forceful enough partner in confronting Russia.</p> <p>"If Russia makes a choice to further invade Ukraine we are jointly ready," Mr. Biden said, standing beside Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the White House, "and all of NATO is ready."</p> <p>Their meeting, the first since Mr. Scholz took office in December, was designed to publicly shore up a key link in the Western alliance as it faces one of its gravest challenges since the Cold War: President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine's borders.</p> <p>Among the main concerns ahead of the meeting, Mr. Biden's advisers said, was Mr. Scholz's reluctance to sign onto punishing economic sanctions in the event of an invasion, or to call off the gas pipeline project, Nord Stream 2.</p> <p>On Monday, Mr. Biden, who has refrained publicly criticizing Mr. Scholz, said that the Germans supported a "strong package" of sanctions but did not detail what those would be. In recent weeks, Mr. Biden has threatened severe economic sanctions against Russia's financial sector and members of Mr. Putin's inner circle. On Nord Stream 2, Mr. Biden said that the project would not go forward if Russia invaded.</p> <p>Mr. Biden defined invasion in the most traditional terms possible — troops and tanks — not addressing a number of other ways his aides fear Mr. Putin could bring the country to its knees, including organizing a coup or launching crippling cyberattacks.</p> <p>"If Russia invades, that means tanks and troops crossing the border of Ukraine again, then there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2," Mr. Biden said. "We will bring an end to it."</p>

When asked exactly how, Mr. Biden said, “I promise you we’ll be able to do it.” Mr. Scholz, asked the same question, did not answer as forcefully. He [has been vague](#) about whether he would agree to terminate the pipeline project, but on Monday he repeated what he has said frequently: “We are absolutely united.”

It has been a rocky first few months on the job for Mr. Scholz, who took over from Angela Merkel, who had worked with four U.S. presidents. Berlin’s reluctance to join in outlining consequences for Russia if it invades Ukraine strained relations to the point that last week the German ambassador in Washington sent a warning home that many in the United States see Germany as an “unreliable partner.”

Mr. Biden forcefully swatted away that notion.

“There’s no need to win back trust,” Mr. Biden said. “He has the complete trust of the United States.”

The situation represents a diplomatic pivot for Mr. Biden, who extolled his relationship with Ms. Merkel in a meeting at the White House in July: “Good friends can disagree” on matters including how each conducted relations with Russia, he said at the time. More than six months later, Mr. Biden is determined to present a united NATO front in the Ukraine crisis; [administration officials say](#) that the Russian military has already assembled 70 percent of the forces it would need to mount a full-scale invasion.

In a call with reporters on Sunday, administration officials said that Mr. Biden would be looking to discuss a package of “swift and severe” sanctions against Russia if Mr. Putin decided to invade Ukraine; the Kremlin insists that no such action is contemplated.

“I don’t know that he knows what he is going to do,” Mr. Biden said. He added, “I have been very very straightforward and blunt with President Putin both on the phone and in person: We will impose the most severe sanctions that have ever been imposed.”

Given the risk of war, Mr. Biden advised American civilians in Ukraine to leave the country, adding that he would “hate to see them get caught in the crossfires.”

In comparison, Mr. Scholz’s relatively vague stance has drawn criticism from both Republicans and Democrats: “The Germans are right now missing in action,” Senator Richard Blumenthal, Democrat of Connecticut, who visited Ukraine in January, [said](#) recently. Senator Rob Portman, Republican of Ohio, has publicly criticized Germany [for not allowing flights carrying military aid](#) for Ukraine to fly through German airspace.

[Nord Stream 2](#), an \$11 billion natural gas conduit being built between Germany and Russia, has been assailed by Mr. Biden and his advisers as a coercive tool against Ukraine and other allies, even though the president agreed last year to waive sanctions related to the project.

The pipeline is [on hold](#) as European Commission officials investigate whether the project is in compliance with European energy policy.

Next week, Mr. Scholz will visit Kyiv and Moscow, following a visit to both cities from Emmanuel Macron, the president of France.

Germany has declined to sell Ukraine weaponry or ammunition, citing a longstanding policy of not contributing to ongoing conflicts. Speaking at a news conference on Monday, Ukraine’s foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said he intended to raise the issue with Germany’s foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock.

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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/canada/canada-protesters-ottawa.html
GIST	<p>OTTAWA — Eleven days into an unruly occupation against coronavirus restrictions that has paralyzed Canada’s capital, the protests have become a rallying cry for powerful far-right and anti-vaccine groups around the world that have made the cause their own.</p> <p>The demonstration in Ottawa started in January as a loosely organized convoy of truck drivers and protesters rumbling across the country to oppose the mandatory vaccination of truckers crossing the U.S.-Canada border. It soon attracted the support of other Canadians exhausted by nearly two years of pandemic restrictions.</p> <p>Some were clearly on the fringe, wearing Nazi symbols and desecrating public monuments. But many described themselves as ordinary Canadians driven to take to the streets by desperation.</p> <p>“They keep doing the same thing, and it’s not working,” said Nicole Vandelaar, a 31-year-old hairdresser protesting in the capital. “They have to do something else. No more lockdowns. Let us live our lives.”</p> <p>On Sunday, after a weekend of boisterous demonstrations, the authorities in Ottawa declared a state of emergency and said the police were overwhelmed. “We continue to employ all available officers, there are no days off,” the Ottawa police chief, Peter Sloly, said Monday. “This is not sustainable.”</p> <p>The message at the heart of the protests — that government has been overreaching for too long — has resonated far away across Canada’s borders.</p> <p>Donors have contributed millions of dollars in online campaigns with hashtags, images and messages of support spreading widely across social media platforms.</p> <p>The protest has also sparked discussion of similar demonstrations in the United States. American truckers are in the planning stages of launching their own convoy, from California to Washington, said Brian Brase, a trucker involved in organizing the effort.</p> <p>Photos of the Canadian truckers appeared on anti-vaccine groups on Facebook and other social networks about two weeks ago. Since then, prominent far-right figures in numerous countries, including the United States, Australia and Germany, have praised the protests, spreading the images and arguments even more widely.</p> <p>The hashtag used by the truckers, #FreedomConvoy, has spread quickly across social media. On Facebook, the hashtag has been shared over 1.2 million times since Jan. 24, according to CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned analytics tool.</p> <p>Another Facebook group dedicated to following and supporting the truckers has attracted nearly 700,000 followers.</p> <p>Meta, the parent company of Facebook, said it removed several groups associated with the convoy for violating their rules around inauthentic behavior. One group had sent people to external sites to buy merchandise. Another group had violated Facebook’s rules by sharing content tied to the banned QAnon conspiracy movement. The company said it was still reviewing other groups formed in connection to the truckers’ protest.</p> <p>On the messaging app Telegram, several right-wing figures, including Dan Bongino, Michael Flynn and Ben Shapiro, have promoted the protest and shared links to fund-raising sites that have collected millions of dollars.</p> <p>American anti-vaccine groups have also begun forming local wings of the movement and have urged truckers in the United States to adopt the tactics in Canada.</p>

A GoFundMe page created on Jan. 14 accumulated more than \$7.8 million before it was frozen by the crowdfunding platform and then halted on Friday. In a statement, the company said donors could submit requests for a refund.

GoFundMe had released only about \$789,000 of those donations before the fund-raiser was shut down, after the company consulted with the police.

In the United States, Senator Ted Cruz, the Texas Republican, called for the Federal Trade Commission to investigate GoFundMe over the halted campaign, joining a chorus of other U.S. politicians and legal figures accusing the crowdfunding site of deceiving donors. Supporters have since been channeling their funds to other platforms, including GiveSendGo, a Christian crowdfunding site that had raised more than \$5 million as of Monday evening.

The funds will be used to “provide humanitarian aid and legal support for the peaceful truckers and their families,” Alex Shipley, a spokeswoman for GiveSendGo, said in an email.

In Ottawa, the occupation has paralyzed the core and political center of Canada’s capital, pushing residents to sleepless fury and anxiety, and causing many businesses to shutter, losing tens of millions of dollars.

But even as a growing number of politicians denounced them, the protesters across from the country’s graceful Parliament buildings made one thing clear: They were not leaving.

Mr. Sloly, the police chief, said at a news conference on Monday that his force would need an additional 1,800 officers — the force now has 1,200 officers — to bring the occupation to an end. It was unclear where those additional officers would come from.

Mr. Sloly has come under criticism for allowing the protesters to block off whole sections of the city with their heaving trucks and sound their bellowing horns late into the night. His force, already boosted by several hundred officers from other forces, began to crack down. On Sunday, officers shut down a staging area for protesters well outside of downtown and confiscated more than 3,000 liters of diesel fuel.

Almost two years after the pandemic hit Canada, the country remains in various stages of lockdown, with restaurants closed in the country’s two largest provinces, Ontario and Quebec, until only recently. Stores, cinemas, and galleries have been shut or faced customer limits in much of the country, where rules vary province by province.

Some of the protest leaders have called on Mr. Trudeau to overturn both national pandemic measures and more local ones — a constitutional impossibility.

On Monday, several government cabinet ministers held a news conference on Monday, denouncing the protesters as lawbreaking extremists who had antagonized many of the city’s residents.

Marco Mendicino, the federal public safety minister, said that there should not be negotiations with protesters.

“It would be a terrible precedent to say that if you show up to the nation’s capital with heavy equipment and blockade the capital city, that you can force reckless change in our public policy,” Mr. Mendicino said, adding, “Canadians deserve to feel safe in their communities and no one is above the law.”

In the protest’s epicenter on Monday, the atmosphere was festive as the sun shone down, warming the temperature to just below freezing. Homemade signs decorated the iron fences that encircle the Parliament grounds. “For cowards, freedom is always extremist,” read one.

A group of people danced to music blaring from speakers on the back of a huge truck. The Canadian flag fluttered from a giant crane.

“I want freedom,” said Rodica Stricescu, 64, a Romanian-born caregiver who came to Canada a few years after the fall of the Soviet Union. “I ran from communism to be here. I don’t want the same situation to happen here.”

Ms. Stricescu had driven eight hours from Windsor, Ontario, for the second weekend in a row to participate in the protests with her daughter.

“I will keep coming back until they say yes,” she said.

Some of the protesters, like Ms. Stricescu, said they had been vaccinated — if reluctantly. Others, like Ms. Vandelaar, were among the 16 percent of Canadians who have not received a single shot.

“The prime minister is triple-vaxxed,” she said. “He socially distances. And he still got it.”

Ms. Vandelaar, a hair stylist from Wainfleet, a rural township about seven hours away, wore clothing made for the protest: a black hat with “fringe minority” written across the brim, and a sweatshirt that read, “Proud member of a small fringe minority with unacceptable views.”

Both were references to Mr. Trudeau’s dismissal of the protesters last week as a “small fringe minority.”

On Monday, Justice Hugh McLean of the Ontario Superior Court offered Ottawa residents a hint of relief, granting a temporary injunction barring the horn honking and authorizing the police to arrest or remove those knowingly violating the order.

Many Ottawa residents are besides themselves.

“This is unbelievably selfish,” said Zully Alvarado, walking through protest grounds displaying a mask — a symbol, she said, of her allegiance to the vaccinated majority. An Ottawa hair stylist, she said the noise, and closures resulting from the occupation, have had a big effect on people already suffering from mental health issues, as well as people who are homeless.

“This is not the Canadian spirit,” she said.

Fed up with what they call a “timid” police response to the protest, some residents of the neighborhoods overrun by trucks are challenging the protesters.

On Kent Street in Ottawa, Christopher Renaud, frustrated after many sleepless nights, kicked an empty fuel can sitting in the road. A heated argument with several protesters followed.

“I’m at the point where a regular car horn is setting me off,” Mr. Renaud, a government employee said after walking away. “I’ve never felt so abandoned by government.”

A protester stepped up and apologized to Mr. Renaud for the disruption.

“The reason we’re invading your city is to uphold our civic rights,” he told Mr. Renaud. “It’s because we feel our body is being invaded.”

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HEADLINE	02/08 In India hate speech nears dangerous levels
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/08/world/asia/india-hate-speech-muslims.html
GIST	<p>HARIDWAR, India — The police officer arrived at the Hindu temple here with a warning to the monks: Don’t repeat your hate speech.</p> <p>Ten days earlier, before a packed audience and thousands watching online, the monks had called for violence against the country’s minority Muslims. Their speeches, in one of India’s holiest cities, promoted</p>

a genocidal campaign to “kill two million of them” and urged an ethnic cleansing of the kind that targeted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.

When videos of the event provoked national outrage, the police came. The saffron-clad preachers questioned whether the officer could be objective.

Yati Narsinghanand, the event’s firebrand organizer known for his violent rhetoric, assuaged their concerns.

“Biased?” Mr. Narsinghanand said, according to a video of the interaction. “He will be on our side,” he added, as the monks and the officer broke into laughter.

Once considered fringe, extremist elements are increasingly taking their militant message into the mainstream, stirring up communal hate in a push to reshape India’s constitutionally protected secular republic into a Hindu state. Activists and analysts say their agenda is being enabled, even normalized, by political leaders and law enforcement officials who offer tacit endorsements by not directly addressing such divisive issues.

After the monks’ call to arms went viral, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his top leaders remained silent, except for a vice president with a largely ceremonial role who [warned that](#) “inciting people against each other is a crime against the nation” without making a specific reference to Haridwar. [Junior members](#) of Mr. Modi’s party attended the event, and the monks have often posted pictures with senior leaders.

“You have persons giving hate speech, actually calling for genocide of an entire group, and we find reluctance of the authorities to book these people,” Rohinton Fali Nariman, a recently retired Indian Supreme Court judge, said in a public lecture. “Unfortunately, the other higher echelons of the ruling party are not only being silent on hate speech, but almost endorsing it.”

Mr. Narsinghanand was later arrested after he ignored the police warning and repeated calls for violence. His lawyer, Uttam Singh Chauhan, said his speeches may have been a reaction to anti-Hindu comments by Muslim clerics.

Mr. Modi’s governing Bharatiya Janata Party did not respond to requests for comment.

“Does the prime minister or home minister need to address every small, trivial issue?” said Vinod Bansal, a spokesman for the World Hindu Council, a party affiliate. “The accused have already been arrested. The secular groups will always highlight such incidents, but not when Hindus, Hindu gods and goddesses are under attack.”

The hate speech is stoking communal tensions in a country where small triggers have incited mass-death tragedies. The monks’ agenda already resonates with [increasingly emboldened](#) vigilante groups.

Vigilantes have beaten people accused of disrespecting cows, considered holy by some Hindus; dragged couples out of trains, cafes and homes on suspicion that Hindu women might be seduced by Muslim men; and barged into religious gatherings where they suspect people are being converted.

In recent weeks, global human rights organizations and local activists, as well as India’s retired security chiefs, have warned that the violent rhetoric has reached a dangerous new pitch. With right-wing messages spreading rapidly through social media and the government hesitant to take action, they are concerned that a singular event — a local dispute, or an attack by international terror groups such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State — could lead to widespread violence that would be difficult to contain.

Gregory Stanton, the founder of Genocide Watch, a nonprofit group, who raised similar warnings ahead of the massacres in Rwanda in the 1990s, told a U.S. congressional briefing that the demonizing and discriminatory “processes” that lead to genocide have been well underway in India.

In an interview, he said [Myanmar was an example](#) of how the easy dissemination of misinformation and hate speech on social media prepares the ground for violence. The difference in India, he said, is that it would be the mobs taking action instead of the military.

“You have to stop it now,” he said, “because once the mobs take over it could really turn deadly.”

The Dasna Devi temple in Uttar Pradesh state, where Mr. Narsinghanand is the chief priest, is peppered with signs that call to prepare for a “dharm yudh,” or religious war. One calls on “Hindus, my lions” to value their weapons “just the way dedicated wives value their husbands.”

The temple’s main sign prohibits Muslims from entering.

The monks’ anger is rooted in a sense of internalized victimhood that dates to the founding of India’s republic after independence from British rule in 1947. When Pakistan was carved out of India in a bloody partition that left hundreds of thousands dead, the Hindu right was incensed that the founding fathers turned what remained of India into a secular republic.

They celebrate a Hindu hard-liner’s assassination of Mohandas Gandhi — a renowned symbol of nonviolent struggle, but to them a Muslim appeaser. Pooja Shakun Pandey, a monk at the Haridwar event, has held re-enactments of Gandhi’s assassination, firing a bullet into his effigy as blood runs down.

The forces that shaped the ideology of Gandhi’s assassin, Nathuram Godse, have slowly risen from the fringes to dominate India’s politics.

Mr. Modi, the prime minister, spent decades as a mobilizer for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the century-old right-wing organization to which Mr. Godse belonged. Mr. Modi’s party sees the group as the fountainhead of its political ideology and has relied heavily on its [vast network of volunteers](#) to mobilize voters and secure victories.

When he was chief minister of Gujarat, Mr. Modi saw firsthand how unchecked communal tensions could turn into bloodletting.

In 2002, a train fire killed 59 Hindu pilgrims. Although the cause was disputed, violent mobs, in response, targeted the Muslim community, leaving more than 1,000 people dead, [many burned alive](#).

Rights organizations and opposition leaders accused Mr. Modi of looking the other way. [He rejected](#) the allegations as political attacks.

After he rose to the country’s highest office in 2014 on a message of economic growth, there was hope that Mr. Modi could rein in the fury. Instead, he has often reverted to a Hindu-first agenda that inflames communal divides.

In 2017, Mr. Modi picked Yogi Adityanath, a monk who had started a youth group accused of vigilante violence, to lead Uttar Pradesh, India’s largest state with more than 200 million people.

In his saffron robe, Mr. Adityanath has legislated a ban on religious conversion by marriage, an idea that he calls “love jihad,” in which Muslim men lure Hindu women to convert them. His group has served as moral police, hounding interfaith couples and punishing anyone suspected of disrespecting cows.

As Mr. Adityanath campaigned for re-election, the group held a meeting in New Delhi around the same time as the monks’ event. With a picture of Mr. Adityanath behind them, attendees took an oath to turn India into a Hindu state, even if it meant killing for it.

Mr. Adityanath’s office would not address his current relations with the group, but said the chief minister “had nothing to do” with the meeting.

Dhirendra K. Jha, a writer who has studied the rise of Hindu nationalism, said he worried that extremists now dominate India's politics in such a way that those who call for violence feel protected.

"Unless this is dealt with, the kind of consequences that may happen — I can't even imagine, I don't dare to imagine," said Mr. Jha.

The choice of Haridwar as the venue for a bold call to violence was strategic — the city attracts millions of visitors annually, often for religious festivals and pilgrimages.

The riverbank was recently busy with seers and worshipers. Families picnicked and took dips in the chilly water. Even as some religious authorities appeared troubled by the calls for violence, they were reluctant to condemn them.

Pradeep Jha, the main organizer of the city's largest pilgrimage festival, said he shared the vision of a Hindu state, not through violence but by urging India's Muslims to convert back; in such a view, everyone in India was Hindu at one point.

"I believe we need to pursue our goals with patience, with peace," he said. "Otherwise, what is our difference with others?"

Mr. Narsinghanand has made a name for himself doing the exact opposite.

As he sees it, India's Muslims — who account for 15 percent of the population — will turn the country into a Muslim state within a decade. To prevent such an outcome, he has told followers that they must "be willing to die," pointing to the Taliban and Islamic State as a "role model."

In 2020, Mr. Narsinghanand was among the hard-liners stoking tensions during monthslong protests over a citizenship amendment seen as discriminatory toward Muslims. He called for violence, using the language of a "final battle." "They are jihadis, and we will have to finish them off," he said.

Riots followed in New Delhi, with 50 people killed, a majority of them Muslims.

Mr. Narsinghanand was always observant, but not an extremist, according to his 82-year-old father, Rajeshwar Dayal Tyagi.

He was a top college student, earning a scholarship to study food technology in Moscow. There, he helped open a vegetarian restaurant for Indian students that still operates.

Returning to India in 1996, he started a computer training institute with money from Mr. Tyagi's pension. He soon dedicated his life to being a monk, leaving behind his wife and young daughter, said his father.

"I feel pained, I feel angry, it gives me stress," his father said. "It's not a good idea to use harsh words against anybody."

Despite the police warning, Mr. Narsinghanand and his fellow monks repeated their messages of hate, including on national television and social media.

"This Constitution will be the end of the Hindus, all one billion Hindus," Mr. Narsinghanand said at a virtual event. "Whoever believes in this system, in this Supreme Court, in these politicians, in this Constitution, in this army and police — they will die a dog's death."

When the police came to arrest an associate, he threatened the officers, who politely urged him to calm down. "You will all die," Mr. Narsinghanand is seen in a video telling them.

The police arrested Mr. Narsinghanand on Jan. 15, and he was charged in court with hate speech.

“He said nothing wrong,” said Swami Amritanand, an organizer of the Haridwar event. “We are doing what America is doing, we are doing what Britain is doing.”

Mr. Amritanand said the call for arms was justified because “within the next 10 to 12 years there will be a horrible war that will play out in India.”

Late last month, the monks again sounded a violent call to create a Hindu state, this time at an event hundreds of miles away from Haridwar in Uttar Pradesh. They threatened violence — referencing a bombing of India’s assembly — if Mr. Narsinghanand was not released.

Ms. Pandey described their actions as defensive. “We must prepare to protect ourselves,” she said.

To the Haridwar police, the event in Uttar Pradesh did not count as a repeat offense. Rakendra Singh Kathait, the senior police officer in Haridwar, said Mr. Narsinghanand was in jail because he had acted again in the city; others like Ms. Pandey got a warning.

“If she goes and says it from Kolkata, it doesn’t count as repeat here,” Mr. Kathait said.

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HEADLINE	02/07 ‘Errors’ at Austin water treatment plant
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/us/austin-boil-water.html
GIST	<p>AUSTIN, Texas — Roughly one million people in Austin have had to boil their water since Saturday after officials said “errors” at a treatment plant resulted in potentially unsafe water flowing into homes and businesses in one of the largest and fastest-growing American cities.</p> <p>It was the second time in a year that residents of the Texas capital have been told to boil water before drinking. Last February, the problems were caused by the collapse of the state’s electricity grid, which resulted in power failures at Austin’s largest water treatment plant.</p> <p>But city officials said the issues at the Ullrich Water Treatment Plant in northwest Austin over the weekend were unrelated to a winter storm that caused temperatures to plunge across the state late last week.</p> <p>“This is a very different event than what happened last year,” Spencer Cronk, the Austin city manager, said during a news conference on Sunday.</p> <p>In a state still traumatized by the failure of its electrical systems during a bitter cold last year, the directive over the weekend to boil water caused frustration and anger across Austin. The notice is likely to remain in effect for the entire city until at least Tuesday afternoon.</p> <p>“We have to do a better job,” Mayor Steve Adler said during a television interview on Monday. “In our city, we can’t have our water system going down like this.”</p> <p>The mayor said 7,000 cases of bottled water had been distributed by the city along with 6,000 gallons of water from delivery tankers. Still, he said, the situation was “incredibly frustrating for everybody in this city.”</p> <p>Water officials said that by Friday, they had weathered last week’s storm without incident. But on Saturday morning around 8 a.m., the head of Austin Water, Greg Meszaros, was alerted to a spike in “turbidity” — the cloudiness of the water going out to consumers — at the Ullrich plant. The plant was immediately shut down.</p>

“They’re essentially water factories,” Mr. Meszaros said in the Sunday news conference. “And sometimes in factories, you’ve got to stop the assembly line. And that’s where it was not properly stopped and corrected and it was allowed to carry through to the finished water and that’s just not appropriate.”

Mr. Meszaros said the failure had been caused by “errors from our operating staff at our Ullrich plant” and said an investigation was continuing. It was not immediately clear at what point the errors occurred or how many people were responsible.

It is not uncommon for officials in towns or cities to issue boil-water notices in response to storms or flooding. Less frequent, and often more long-lasting, are water supply problems that stem from the city’s own infrastructure, as has been the case in [Flint, Mich.](#), and [Jackson, Miss.](#)

Austinites have become reluctantly familiar with boil-water notices. In addition to the winter storm last year — which left nearly seven million Texans under a boil-water advisory — [flooding created problems to Austin’s water supply in 2018](#), resulting in a boil-water notice.

“Being able to provide safe drinking water, that should not be one of the challenges we have to solve,” Natasha Harper-Madison, a city councilwoman, said. “It’s beyond frustrating to have to go through this kind of incident with this frequency.”

Hilda Salinas, 60, was cooking sopa de fideo for her 1-year-old grandson on Saturday afternoon when she heard about the boil-water notice. Ms. Salinas recalled shaking her head in defeat and throwing the soup away.

“I didn’t trust it to be safe for my grandson to eat,” she said.

Ms. Salinas, a retired U.S. Postal worker who was at a city-run distribution site on Monday to pick up a case of bottled water, expressed a common frustration among residents of Austin, where real estate values are skyrocketing as new arrivals pour in.

“I mean taxes are high, getting higher and they can’t get the water straight,” Ms. Salinas said. “I don’t know what else to say.”

Paula Mendoza was also among those picking up bottled water at a water facility on Monday — her 61st birthday. Ms. Mendoza said she had been laid off from her job at a nonprofit last month and could not afford to buy her own cases.

“Money is tight right now,” she said. She said she drank water from her faucet part of Sunday until a friend called to let her know about the water notice. “Today is my birthday,” she added. “I can’t get sick.”

Many residents who could afford to do so had prepared for a possible water outage because of the winter weather passing through last week, stockpiling water and filling bath tubs.

“Unfortunately, we’re getting pretty well-versed in how to protect our families,” said Paige Ellis, a city councilwoman who has called for a special meeting of the Council to look into circumstances at the Ullrich plant. Two other treatment plants in the city had been operating normally.

On Monday, local restaurants had to add water issues to their list of troubles.

Sharon Mays, 49, the owner of a fast-food salad and wrap restaurant, spent nearly her whole day boiling water to wash produce and for other fresh food. “We need 12 to 15 gallons of water just to do the lettuce,” she said.

Her difficulties have been compounded by pandemic-related supply chain disruptions; for instance, she said, two-ounce cups for dressing had recently become hard to find. “When you put it on top of the mountain of other things, I have no idea what this is going to do to my business,” she said.

	<p>This was the third time Ms. Mays has had to contend with a boil-water notice since opening in 2016. “The fact that I’ve had to do this as many times as I’ve had — why is this an issue in Austin, Texas?” she said.</p> <p>Officials said the kind of human error that appeared to be behind the current need for residents to boil their water — for two minutes, at a rolling boil — was unusual if not unprecedented.</p> <p>“It’s never happened before,” Mr. Meszaros said. “It’s not easy. We have many controls in place.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Study: New York deer infected w/omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/health/omicron-deer-staten-island-covid.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Health
GIST	<p>White-tailed deer on Staten Island have been found carrying the highly transmissible Omicron variant of the coronavirus, marking the first time the variant has been reported in wild animals.</p> <p>The findings add to a growing body of evidence that white-tailed deer are easily infected by the virus. The results are likely to intensify concerns that deer, which are widely distributed across the United States and live near humans, could become a reservoir for the virus and a potential source of new variants.</p> <p>Researchers have previously reported that the virus was widespread in deer in Iowa in late 2020 and parts of Ohio in early 2021.</p> <p>The U.S. Department of Agriculture has confirmed infections in deer in 13 additional states — Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Virginia — Lyndsay Cole, a spokesperson for the agency’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said on Thursday. Those animals were infected with earlier variants of the virus.</p> <p>Research suggests that deer are catching the virus from humans and then spreading it to other deer, and there is no evidence that the animals are transmitting it back to people. But longer-term, widespread circulation of the virus in deer would give the virus more opportunity to mutate, potentially giving rise to new variants that could spill over into people or other animal species.</p> <p>“The circulation of the virus in deer provides opportunities for it to adapt and evolve,” said Vivek Kapur, a veterinary microbiologist at Penn State University, who is part of the Staten Island research team. “And it’s likely to come back and haunt us in the future.”</p> <p>The researchers also found that one deer with Omicron already had a high level of antibodies to the virus, suggesting that it may have been previously infected. Omicron has proved able to evade some of the immune system’s defenses in humans. If it is similarly immune-evasive in deer, animals infected during earlier outbreaks may be vulnerable to reinfection.</p> <p>The news that Omicron had breached white-tailed deer populations was not unexpected, experts said.</p> <p>“It’s disappointing but it’s not surprising,” said Dr. Scott Weese, an infectious diseases veterinarian at the University of Guelph in Ontario.</p> <p>“Omicron is quite ubiquitous,” said Dr. Samira Mubareka, a virologist at Sunnybrook Research Institute and the University of Toronto.</p> <p>The new research, which has not yet been published in a scientific journal, is a partnership among the Penn State researchers, the conservation nonprofit White Buffalo, the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation and other institutions. As part of a deer population-control study, White Buffalo has been working with the city to capture local deer and sterilize some of the young males.</p>

Between mid-December and the end of January, the field workers collected blood samples from 131 captured deer, as well as nasal and tonsillar swabs from a smaller subset of animals.

Nearly 15 percent of the deer had antibodies to the virus in their blood, the researchers found, suggesting that the animals had previously been infected with it.

P.C.R. testing of the swabs from 68 deer also revealed that seven of the animals were actively infected with the virus at the time of sampling. The P.C.R. tests also revealed that viral samples from all seven deer had a pattern of mutations that was suggestive of the Omicron variant.

The researchers have now sequenced four of those samples and confirmed that at least four deer were infected by Omicron, which spread rapidly through New York City's human population in December.

"The recent wave is spilling over," Dr. Kapur said.

The researchers cautioned that it was impossible to make sweeping conclusions based on the single deer that tested positive for the virus and also had high levels of antibodies in its blood. They could not rule out the possibility that the animal had developed those antibodies during the course of its current infection.

But if the findings hold up, and deer can be repeatedly reinfected by new variants, it raises the risk that the animals could become a reservoir for the virus, the scientists said.

"You can imagine this could be a never-ending, perpetual cycle of deer constantly circulating the virus among themselves and picking up the new variants," said Suresh Kuchipudi, a veterinary microbiologist at Penn State who led the research team.

How humans are spreading the virus to deer remains unknown. People could spread the virus to the animals directly — perhaps by hand-feeding deer in parks or yards, the researchers noted — or indirectly, through wastewater or contaminated trash.

Dr. Mubareka emphasized the need for longitudinal surveillance of the Staten Island deer to determine how the variant evolves, whether it spills over into other wildlife, and what level of illness it causes. Deer have appeared asymptomatic when infected with earlier variants.

The researchers are hoping to conduct laboratory studies of the antibodies they detected in the Staten Island deer to try to determine which version of the virus each animal was infected by — and how much those antibodies might protect against other variants.

Does a Delta infection protect deer from being reinfected by Delta? Does it protect against Omicron? Does an Omicron infection protect against a future Delta infection?

"These are all open questions," said Kurt Vandegrift, a disease ecologist at Penn State and member of the research team. "We're brand-new in finding these infections in the wild. And so that's why we're taking data, and that's why we need to do more surveillance."

In the meantime, the researchers said, New Yorkers should not fear their local deer, but keeping a safe distance away from wildlife is always a good practice.

Several states including New Jersey and Massachusetts have recommended additional measures for hunters butchering animals in the field, such as avoiding the head, lungs and digestive tract, in addition to general hygiene practices. "Get vaccinated, wear a mask, gloves, wash your hands, but assume that you could be exposed," Dr. Mubareka said.

	The best way to prevent deer from becoming a reservoir for the virus is to curb its spread in humans, the scientists emphasized. The discovery of Omicron in deer, Dr. Kuchipudi said, “is a reminder and probably call for action that the pandemic’s not over yet.”
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HEADLINE	02/07 Doctors in Turkey leaving in droves
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/asia/turkey-inflation-doctors.html
GIST	<p>ISTANBUL — Anxiety rose after an assistant doctor died last fall when she plowed her car into the back of a truck after a long shift.</p> <p>Then there were the growing cases of violence. An assistant doctor abandoned his career after a patient stabbed him in the stomach and hand. A pregnant nurse was hospitalized after being kicked in the belly.</p> <p>The worsening economy and soaring inflation, which has reduced some doctors’ salaries close to the level of the minimum wage, has brought many to a tipping point, driving them in growing numbers to search for better opportunities abroad.</p> <p>Their departures are a sad indictment of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who burnished his own reputation by expanding universal health care over his 18 years in power. It was one of his signature achievements. For many of his supporters, that action alone remains their main reason to support him.</p> <p>But the strains of those overhauls wrought by Mr. Erdogan, in addition to those brought by the pandemic — and now galloping inflation — have undermined the very professionals on whom the health system depends.</p> <p>Doctors complain of a grinding workload, diminishing returns for their work, a drastic loss of respect for the profession under Mr. Erdogan, and an increase in physical violence from their own patients.</p> <p>More than 1,400 Turkish doctors left their posts to work abroad last year, and 4,000 over the past decade, according to the Turkish Medical Association, the largest association of medical professionals in the country. Many more are preparing applications and have requested certificates of good standing from the organization, officials said.</p> <p>“This is a result of long-accumulating issues,” said Bulent Kilic, a professor of public health at Dokuz Eylul University in the western city of Izmir. “In the last 20 years, there have been serious changes in the name of reform, and I think the heavy workload in the pandemic was the final straw.”</p> <p>For a long time, the changes that Mr. Erdogan introduced bore fruit. Turkey has long prided itself on the quality of its medical schools and its medical professionals, and in recent years, it has developed a thriving private health industry catering to thousands of international as well as Turkish patients. Fifteen new large city hospitals were built to expand the health service while access was broadened for the public.</p> <p>The health minister recently praised the president’s foresight, saying the system held up well during the worst days of the pandemic and facilities were never overwhelmed.</p> <p>But the system is no doubt stressed, leaving doctors feeling overburdened and underpaid. The steady erosion of their income and status has been too much for many doctors to bear.</p> <p>“Three years ago, I would have said the salary was fair, but now it is not,” said Dr. Furkan Cagri Koral, 26, a junior doctor who left Turkey only two years after graduating. “Doctors in Turkey are working at the level of slave labor considering the workload and the risks they are taking.”</p> <p>He went to Germany, where, after 11 months of language training, he found a job as an assistant doctor in the town of Chemnitz and is preparing to take an equivalency exam that will allow him to practice. Dr. Koral said he was already encouraging colleagues and his sister, a medical student, to follow suit.</p>

“It is not only low salaries” driving health professionals away, said Dr. Sebnem Korur Fincanci, the chairwoman of the Turkish Medical Association. “It is the devaluation of the profession, over many years, since the beginning of the rule of the A.K.P.,” she said, referring to Mr. Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party.

The opening up of access to all hospitals on demand, without a referral system, overloaded them, while hospitals were encouraged to raise patient numbers and financial returns. At the same time, Dr. Fincanci said, Mr. Erdogan embraced a policy of privatization of health care and a performance pay system that has led to a focus on quantity rather than quality.

“There were too many appointments, too many operations, some not necessary,” she said. Patients were happy at first, but the open-access system was not sustainable. Hospitals began raising their prices and shortening appointments. A centralized system allows only 10 minutes for appointments, and in some cases only five minutes, which creates tensions all around.

Violence against medical professionals has risen sharply in the past two years — mostly in emergency departments — often in an explosion of anger at the system. More than 13,000 health professionals lodged complaints that they had been subjected to violence at work in 2020, according to the Turkish Medical Association.

“People are not tolerant enough,” Dr. Fincanci said.

“Since they are unhappy in their workplace and houses, and values are deteriorating, violence becomes a problem,” she added.

Other issues, including gender discrimination, nepotism and cronyism in management and an increase in lawsuits against medical practitioners, have made doctors lose hope, she said.

“They do not think the situation will change,” Dr. Fincanci said. “It is not only the health system, but the general environment.”

There are ways to remedy the health system, Dr. Kilic, of Dokuz Eylul University, said, including raising budgetary expenditure on health and increasing the proportion of spending on preventive care. Turks also need to be weaned off their high level of visits to hospitals and use of tests, he added.

But retaining doctors and other medical personnel is equally vital, he said, because Turkey has a far lower level of trained professionals in proportion to its population than most European countries.

Mr. Erdogan and Dr. Fahrettin Koca, Turkey’s health minister, have both acknowledged the problem of Turkey’s brain drain but have offered little practical respite. “Don’t forget, our physicians are the best-trained physicians, and the richest countries have their eyes on them,” Dr. Koca told Parliament in a speech in December.

Parliament recently raised the penalties for violence committed against health workers, and Dr. Koca appealed to the assembly in December to consider salaries and other rights of health sector workers.

For Dr. Dogan Can Celik, 29, who works at a public hospital in Istanbul, it is not enough. He is planning to leave for Britain as soon as he completes his residency in about six months.

“I love my country, and especially Istanbul, but in the last four years, it really changed,” he said. He said the working hours and poor remuneration were his main reasons for leaving. “When I see our professors and mentors, I think I don’t want to be in their situation because after 40 years as a professor, they get really low salaries.”

	<p>Unlike previous waves of Turkish workers heading to Europe, those emigrating these days have little intention of returning and are leaving to give their children better opportunities, according to several people working in the business of relocating doctors.</p> <p>Ekin Ay set up a business teaching medical German to Turkish doctors five years ago and has seen demand double in the past two years. One-fifth of her students are over 40, and some are over 50, she said. “They are not leaving for economic reasons but because of their families,” she said.</p> <p>Dr. Cemal Altuntas moved to Germany three years ago and plans to start working full time as a consultant for relocating doctors. He said there had been a huge increase in requests from doctors in the past six months.</p> <p>“It’s not a luxurious life that we want,” he said. “We want the normal life that we deserve.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DOH: 1,382,782 cases, 11,099 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article258145348.html
GIST	<p>The Washington state Department of Health reported 3,300 new COVID-19 cases Monday.</p> <p>As of Monday, the state’s preliminary death tally was 11,099. That number is unchanged since Friday.</p> <p>The confirmed death tally as of Jan. 20 was 10,699. The statewide case total from the illness caused by the coronavirus stood at 1,382,782 cases on Monday. The state logged 9,706 new cases on Saturday and 5,006 new cases on Sunday.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Amazon raises base salary cap to \$350,000
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazon-is-raising-base-salary-cap-to-350000-from-160000/
GIST	<p>Amazon is more than doubling the maximum base salary it pays employees to \$350,000 from \$160,000. “This past year has seen a particularly competitive labor market, and in doing a thorough analysis of various options, weighing the economics of our business and the need to remain competitive for attracting and retaining top talent, we decided to make meaningfully bigger increases to our compensation levels than we do in a typical year,” the company told employees Monday in a memo reviewed by Bloomberg.</p> <p>Amazon also said it was increasing the compensation ranges of most jobs globally and is changing the timing of stock awards to align with promotions.</p> <p>Like many big employers, Amazon has struggled to hire and retain workers of late. The company has long relied on stock awards, betting it can entice workers to take positions even if the base pay is low. But the stock languished in 2021, gaining just 2.4% while the S&P 500 jumped 27%, and the strategy began to lose its appeal. Media reports indicate the turnover rate inside Amazon has reached crisis levels, and a record 50 vice presidents departed last year.</p> <p>The e-commerce giant employed 1.6 million globally as of Dec. 31, including warehouse workers who are paid hourly and office staff who earn annual salaries. Amazon declined to say how many employees would receive the bump in pay announced Monday.</p> <p>Amazon pays warehouse workers at least \$15 an hour and in September said it had raised average wages for these employees to \$18 an hour. During the pandemic, the company has spent heavily on its logistics operation, hiring hundreds of thousands of people and paying bonuses to new recruits.</p> <p>Investors have been warily watching Amazon’s rising costs and expressed relief when the company reported a strong fourth quarter last week and said the cost of an annual Prime subscription would rise \$20 to \$139. The shares soared almost 14% Friday and were up slightly to \$3,158.71 by market’s close Monday.</p>

HEADLINE	02/07 Oregon lifts indoor mask mandate in March
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/oregon-to-lift-indoor-mask-requirement-by-end-of-march/
GIST	<p>PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Oregon’s statewide mask requirement for indoor public places will be lifted no later than the end of March, health officials announced Monday.</p> <p>In addition, mask requirements for schools will be lifted on March 31.</p> <p>Education and health officials will meet in coming weeks to revise guidance to “ensure schools can continue operating safely and keep students in class” after mask rule is lifted, said Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state medical officer and epidemiologist.</p> <p>“This will give (school officials) time to look at their community condition — vaccination rates and spread in their community — and decide if they want to implement a local mandate or requirement for schools,” Sidelinger said.</p> <p>The end of March deadline for lifting statewide mask rules was selected using predictions by local health scientists that COVID-19 related hospitalizations will decrease to 400 or fewer by that time — a level that Oregon experienced before the omicron variant surge.</p> <p>As of Friday, the most recent data available, 1,092 coronavirus patients were hospitalized in the state.</p> <p>COVID-19 forecasts show hospitalizations peaking at 1,169 and declining throughout February and March. However, health officials cautioned that the state’s emergence from the omicron surge depends on Oregon residents maintaining effective prevention measures in coming weeks.</p> <p>“We’re likely to see as many cases on the way down from the omicron peak as we saw on the way up,” Sidelinger said. “That means we need to keep taking steps to prevent more hospitalizations and deaths.”</p> <p>Oregon, which is one of a handful of states — including Washington and California — that still have indoor face covering requirements, has had the mask mandate in place since mid-August 2021.</p> <p>Under the rule, Oregon residents five and older regardless of vaccination status must wear masks in public indoor spaces — including grocery stores, restaurants, and gyms. Violators face fines of up to \$500 per day.</p> <p>However, the current mask rule was temporary and set to expire on Tuesday, just as COVID-19 hospitalizations are cresting and state health care systems remain overwhelmed.</p> <p>Due to a technicality in state law, health officials on Monday filed a “permanent” mask rule with the Secretary of State.</p> <p>The filing was the only way that they could extend the current temporary mask rule beyond its expiration date until officials determine that mask rules are no longer be needed.</p> <p>Although the rule is labeled as “permanent” officials said it will be lifted by the end of March.</p> <p>However, even with officials saying the rule would be lifted when it is deemed “no longer necessary,” more than 350 people — ranging from stay-at-home parents, registered nurses, a speech language pathologist, teachers and business owners in rural and urban areas — attended a virtual public hearing about the rule where they vehemently opposed it and called it government overreach.</p> <p>After the rules are lifted, employers, businesses and school districts can implement their own mask rules.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Four states to lift school mask mandates
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-education-new-jersey-ce67cdfc4373407645fbfb5223051dcd
GIST	<p>TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — The governors of four states announced plans Monday to lift statewide mask requirements in schools by the end of February or March, citing the rapid easing of COVID-19's omicron surge.</p> <p>The decisions in Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey and Oregon were announced as state and local governments grapple with which virus restrictions to jettison and which ones to keep in place. The changes also come amid a growing sense that the virus is never going to go away and Americans need to find a way to coexist with it.</p> <p>New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy called the move “a huge step back to normalcy for our kids” and said individual school districts will be free to continue requiring masks after the state mandate ends March 7.</p> <p>Meanwhile, California announced plans to end its indoor masking requirement for vaccinated people next week, but masks will still be the rule for schoolchildren in the nation's most populous state.</p> <p>The four states are among a dozen with mask mandates in schools, according to the nonpartisan National Academy for State Health Policy. New Jersey's requirement has been in place since classes resumed in person in September 2020.</p> <p>Murphy cited the “dramatic decline in our COVID numbers” in announcing the rollback. The omicron variant fueled a spike in infections over the holidays, but cases in the state are down 50% and hospitalizations dropped off by one-third since last week, he said.</p> <p>“We are not — and I've said this many times — going to manage COVID to zero,” the governor said. “We have to learn how to live with COVID as we move from a pandemic to an endemic phase of this virus.”</p> <p>Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont recommended ending the statewide mandate in schools and child care centers on Feb. 28. Delaware Gov. John Carney said his state's school mask mandate will run through March.</p> <p>Oregon's mask requirements for schools will be lifted March 31. The statewide mask requirement for indoor public places will be lifted no later than the end of March, health officials announced.</p> <p>Dr. Dean Sidelinger, the state medical officer and epidemiologist, said education and health officials will meet in the coming weeks to revise guidance to “ensure schools can continue operating safely and keep students in class” once the mask rule is lifted.</p> <p>The March 31 deadline was selected using predictions by health scientists that COVID-19-related hospitalizations will decrease to 400 or fewer by that time — a level that Oregon experienced before the omicron variant surge.</p> <p>In California, unvaccinated people will still be required to be masked indoors after Feb. 15, and everyone will have to wear masks in higher-risk areas such as public transit and nursing homes and other congregate living facilities, state officials said. Local governments can continue their own indoor masking requirements.</p> <p>State officials also announced that indoor “mega events” with more than 1,000 people will have to require vaccinations or negative tests, and those who are unvaccinated will be required to wear masks. For outdoor events with more than 10,000 people, there is no vaccination requirement, but masks or negative tests will be recommended.</p>

The debate over masks in schools has been polarizing in much of the U.S., with parents protesting at school board meetings and slates of candidates — pro- and anti-mask — seeking school board seats in an attempt to shape policies.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that universal mask-wearing in schools “still remains our recommendation,” but she did not fault states for dropping the requirement.

“It’s always been up to school districts. That’s always been our point of view and always been our policy from here,” she said.

Eight Republican-led states, including Florida and Texas, have bans on school mask mandates, though some have been suspended amid legal fights with districts and parents who want to require masks, according to the National Academy for State Health Policy.

In Illinois, where a judge last week struck down Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker’s statewide school mask mandate, the Democratic attorney general said Monday he will appeal the ruling. The Chicago school system, where teachers recently refused to hold in-person classes until an agreement was reached on safety measures, including providing KN95 masks to students and staff, said the ruling doesn’t apply and the nation’s third-largest district will continue to require masks.

Murphy faced pressure from Republicans and some parents who have held rallies at the statehouse demanding an end to the mandate. But the governor has had support for the mask rule from the New Jersey Education Association, the state’s biggest teachers union.

In a statement, the union noted that trends show COVID-19 heading in the right direction, and added: “It is appropriate for Gov. Murphy to allow local districts to continue to require masking in communities where that is prudent based on local conditions.”

Nationwide, new COVID-19 cases per day have plunged by more than a half-million since mid-January, when they hit a record-shattering peak of more than 800,000. Cases have been declining in 47 states over the past two weeks, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

Also, the number of Americans in the hospital with COVID-19 has fallen 28% since mid-January to about 111,000.

Deaths are still running high at more than 2,400 per day on average, the most since last winter, reflecting a lag between when victims become infected and when they die.

In New Jersey, it is unclear how many and how soon the state’s 600-plus school districts might end the wearing of masks.

In Paterson, the state’s third-biggest city, the school system will take time to consult with administration officials, principals, parents and staff, said district spokesperson Paul Brubaker.

Melissa Alfieri-Collins, a mother of two who disagrees with mask mandates in schools, saying she prefers “choice,” called the governor’s decision good news. But she raised concern that districts might keep mask rules in place.

“For this reason, parents need an opt-out option for when and if districts do this,” she said.

Connecticut will also allow school districts to retain the mandate. It’s unclear if Delaware will follow suit, but the governor said he wanted to give school districts time to consider a local mandate.

Stephen White, a 55-year-old father of a 14-year-old son, said that if the lifting of the mandate were to take effect immediately, he wouldn’t be in favor of it. But four weeks from now is a different story.

	<p>“By that time period, if the rates are going down and they can say that ‘OK, kids are vaccinated’ — if they have a substantial amount of kids that are vaccinated — I don’t have a problem with them not wearing a mask at school,” he said.</p> <p>Francis Amegah, a 63-year-old with two children in the Newark school district, said the end of the mandate is “well overdue.”</p> <p>“They shouldn’t be wearing masks. If something happens, we’ll be able to handle that. The parents should be able to take care of that,” he said.</p> <p>Republicans claimed responsibility for pushing the governor to end the mandate.</p> <p>“Gov. Murphy will never admit that the pressure is getting to him, but it absolutely is,” GOP Senate Leader Steve Oroho said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DHS: midterms could spark violence
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/elections-violence-presidential-elections-race-and-ethnicity-misinformation-fb2c6bb5532d34fdb077304400662e4d
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — The upcoming midterm elections are emerging as a rallying point for domestic extremists and foreign adversaries seeking to disrupt the U.S. and incite violence, the Department of Homeland Security warned Monday.</p> <p>Unsubstantiated fraud claims, which have haunted the country since the 2020 presidential election, may be used to fuel unrest and doubts about the elections to decide control of Congress, DHS officials said as the agency issued a new national terrorism advisory.</p> <p>A senior DHS official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the terrorism advisory before its release, told reporters that part of their objective may be to sow discord and undermine credibility in democratic institutions by promoting misinformation about upcoming races.</p> <p>Concerns about the election is just one element in a terrorism alert that broadly warns of potential violence in what the government calls a “heightened threat environment” that includes foreign and domestic misinformation campaigns, conspiracy theories and lone actors with grievances rooted in racial and ethnic hatred.</p> <p>The National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin, which is periodically updated by DHS in a replacement of the color-coded warnings of the past, warns that the primary threat to the U.S. remains lone offenders or small cells of individuals.</p> <p>It cited as recent examples the attack on the synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, last month by a British national demanding the release of a Pakistani neuroscientist convicted of trying to kill U.S. Army officers, and last week’s bomb threats targeting several historically Black universities.</p> <p>“DHS remains committed to proactively sharing timely information and intelligence about the evolving threat environment with the American public,” DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in a statement. “We also remain committed to working with our partners across every level of government and in the private sector to prevent all forms of terrorism and targeted violence, and to support law enforcement efforts to keep our communities safe.”</p> <p>U.S. terrorism advisories typically reflect recent events as well as anything on the horizon that might inspire an attack. The concern about the midterms comes as many Americans already are skeptical about the results of the November 2020 election because of the repeated unfounded claims of fraud leveled by former President Donald Trump and his allies.</p>

	<p>The alert warns that the months leading up to the midterms could see extremists using online forums and other methods to call for violence at democratic institutions, candidates, party offices, election and poll workers.</p> <p>“The best way to resist such efforts is to recognize them for what they are: efforts to weaken the fabric of American society,” said Thomas Warrick, a former senior DHS official who is now with the Atlantic Council. “More will be coming as the United States heads towards the Nov. 8, 2022, election.”</p> <p>The senior DHS official who spoke to reporters Monday singled out only Russia among foreign adversaries, without offering any specific evidence but citing the country’s ongoing efforts to use propaganda and misinformation to undermine the U.S. government long before the standoff over Ukraine.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Top science advisor resigns: misbehavior
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/science/white-house-top-scientist-mistreated-staff-apologizes/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden’s top science adviser Eric Lander resigned Monday, hours after the White House confirmed that an internal investigation found credible evidence that he mistreated his staff, marking the first Cabinet-level departure of the Biden administration.</p> <p>An internal review last year, prompted by a workplace complaint, found evidence that Lander, the director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy and science adviser to Biden, bullied staffers and treated them disrespectfully. The White House rebuked Lander over his interactions with his staff, but initially signaled Monday that he would be allowed to remain on the job, despite Biden’s Inauguration Day assertion that he expected “honesty and decency” from all who worked for his administration and would fire anyone who shows disrespect to others “on the spot.”</p> <p>But later Monday evening, press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden had accepted Lander’s resignation with “gratitude for his work at OTSP on the pandemic, the Cancer Moonshot, climate change, and other key priorities.”</p> <p>Lander, in his resignation letter, said, “I am devastated that I caused hurt to past and present colleagues by the way in which I have spoken to them.”</p> <p>“I believe it is not possible to continue effectively in my role, and the work of this office is far too important to be hindered,” he added.</p> <p>The White House said Biden did not request Lander’s resignation.</p> <p>Earlier Monday, Psaki said senior administration officials had met with Lander about his actions and management of the office, but indicated he would be allowed to stay in the job, saying the administration was following a “process” to handle workplace complaints.</p> <p>“Following the conclusion of the thorough investigation into these actions, senior White House officials conveyed directly to Dr. Lander that his behavior was inappropriate, and the corrective actions that were needed, which the White House will monitor for compliance moving forward,” she said.</p> <p>Psaki added, “The president has been crystal clear with all of us about his high expectations of how he and his staff should be creating a respectful work environment.”</p> <p>The White House said Lander and OSTP would be required to take certain corrective actions as part of the review. It also said the review did not find “credible evidence” of gender-based discrimination and the reassignment of the staffer who filed the original complaint was “deemed appropriate.”</p> <p>Lander on Friday issued an apology to staffers in his office, acknowledging “I have spoken to colleagues within OSTP in a disrespectful or demeaning way.”</p>

“I am deeply sorry for my conduct,” he added. “I especially want to apologize to those of you who I treated poorly, or were present at the time.”

The White House review was completed weeks ago, but it was confirmed — and Lander apologized — only after reporting by Politico.

Biden’s “Safe and Respectful Workplace Policy” was instituted when he took office and was meant to serve as a contrast from the often-demeaning way former President Donald Trump and his aides treated one another and political foes.

Lander’s conduct and the White House’s initial decision to stand by him sparked some consternation inside the White House and among Biden allies and created an unnecessary distraction from Biden’s agenda.

By late Monday, Lander came to believe he was in an untenable position and resigned effective no later than Feb. 18, “in order to permit an orderly transfer.”

There are five deputy directors — four women and one man — at the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Kei Koizumi is the deputy director for policy. Former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief Jane Lubchenco is the deputy for climate science. Sally Benson is the deputy for energy. Carrie Wolinetz is the deputy director for health and life science. Alondra Nelson is the deputy director for science and society.

The world’s largest general science society disinvited Lander from speaking at their annual meeting shortly before his resignation was announced. American Association for the Advancement of Science Chief Executive Officer Sudip Parikh said he didn’t know if that had anything to do with the resignation.

“I hope that we sent the right message about what’s important,” Parikh told The Associated Press Monday night. “The time of letting these things go is over. Not just in sciences, but in workplaces all across America.”

“This is an administration that has put a lot of their political capital into science and technology,” Parikh added. “It’s a tough role to fill. It’s very possible and very likely that that person could be a woman.”

Lander, whose position was elevated to Cabinet-rank by Biden, appeared prominently with the president last week when he relaunched his “Cancer Moonshot” program to marshal federal resources behind research and treatment for cancer diseases.

The founding director of the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Lander is a mathematician and molecular biologist. He was lead author of the first paper announcing the details of the human genome, the so-called “book of life.”

His confirmation to his role in the Biden administration was delayed for months as senators sought more information about meetings he had with the late Jeffrey Epstein, a disgraced financier who was charged with sex trafficking before his suicide. Lander also was criticized for downplaying the contributions of two Nobel Prize-winning female scientists.

At his confirmation hearing last year, Lander apologized for a 2016 article he wrote that downplayed the work of the female scientists. At the hearing, he also called Epstein “an abhorrent individual.”

Lander said he “understated the importance of those key advances” by biochemists Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna. The two were later awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

Lander’s departure on the grounds of Biden’s respectful workplace policy echoed the February 2021 resignation of then-White House deputy press secretary TJ Ducklo, who was suspended and then resigned over threatening conversations with a reporter.

HEADLINE	02/07 Seattle inflation largest increase 3 decades
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/economy/seattle-registers-largest-increase-in-inflation-in-three-decades/
GIST	<p>Over the past year, inflation in the U.S. hit a four decade high, the Labor Department reported last month. In Seattle, the growth was even higher.</p> <p>The Consumer Price Index, which measures the average change in prices for consumer goods and services over time, increased 7% across the U.S. in 2021 — the largest increase since 1981. In Seattle, prices climbed even faster at 7.6% — the largest increase since 1998, according to the earliest available data from the department’s Bureau of Labor Statistics.</p> <p>The Seattle area saw the largest surge in prices since 1991 last year. Seattle’s CPI over the past year increased more than most other U.S. cities.</p> <p>The goods and services monitored in the CPI are everyday items, ranging from groceries to appliances, transportation or housing — often referred to as a market basket of goods and services. The items are weighted in a monthly or annual household budget to measure the inflation rate, or how the increase in prices affects the average person.</p> <p>Certain items, like the price of gasoline, are known to fluctuate day-to-day, while items like postage stamps, may change occasionally by a small margin. When measuring inflation, economists pay particular attention to less volatile items.</p> <p>In Seattle’s market basket, the cost of less volatile items such as used cars and trucks, household furnishings and appliances, and housing, have risen significantly over the past year. The price of food and beverages increased 8.9%, led by the significant rising cost of meat, poultry and eggs, alcoholic beverages and fruits and vegetables. Like the rest of the country, energy prices here have also jumped largely due to higher prices for gasoline and natural gas service.</p> <p>This rate of increase in gasoline prices in 2021 is the highest recorded in the Seattle area since 2009.</p> <p>Among the various weights assigned to dozens of goods and services, shelter or housing weighs the heaviest by far. In December 2020, its relative importance to other weighted goods was over 40%.</p> <p>Studies show an increase in price for housing services is more likely to affect young people, communities of color and lower-income households, as they are more likely to rent. Similarly, a price increase for used cars and health care has a greater impact on these groups, as it’s more likely they cannot afford new cars, or are uninsured and likely have to pay out of pocket for medical expenses.</p> <p>Inflation is a case of “too much money chasing too few goods,” said Jacob Vigdor, an economist with the University of Washington Evans School of Public Policy.</p> <p>The city has always been more expensive than other parts of the country because of, among other things, relatively high shipping costs in the Pacific Northwest.</p> <p>“When you think about what’s going on here recently, not only has Seattle been more expensive than other places for a while, the price level is now accelerating faster and ahead of other parts of the country,” Vigdor said.</p> <p>Wages and salaries have not kept pace with the rising prices. In the Seattle area, the gap between the growth rate over the past year and the increase in salaries and wages over the same time was a 3.8 percentage point difference. In 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic, this gap stood at 0.9 percentage points.</p>

And while Seattle's CPI increased at a higher rate than most other cities, wages and salaries did not rise as quickly. Compared to other metros, Seattle recorded a lower increase over the past year.

This accelerated rise in prices here is reflective of a few factors, including the increase in household savings during the pandemic. Economists note while the federal stimulus money has been a contributing factor, it is not the primary factor in rising prices.

The key factor is the shortage in the supply of workers. "Statistically speaking, if you are a job seeker right now, you're going to find it," said Anneliese Vance-Sherman, Seattle regional economist with the state Employment Security Department.

Typically in a recession, workers are laid off if there is less demand for their work, causing the unemployment rate to rise. When the demand returns, it usually comes back to an ample supply of labor. But this time, while the demand has returned, the supply has not.

"The [labor] supply is still constrained by the uncertainty that's present with the COVID-19 pandemic," Vance-Sherman said.

She pointed to the reduction in the number of women in labor force during the pandemic as one factor in the shortage.

"A lot of women-dominated professions were impacted early on, and a lot of women in particular stayed home to care for children with increased child care constraints like online schooling," she said. "A lot of those constraints are still in place."

The high cost of housing in Seattle also has an impact on the labor force, because some companies can't find workers who can afford to live in Seattle at the wages they offer, Vigdor said. To find workers, he said, employers have to pay premium wages — some portion of which is often passed on to consumers.

He added that the accelerated growth in prices could be a one-time disruption to the economy caused by the pandemic, and as life returns to normal so should prices.

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HEADLINE	02/07 California to rollback mask mandate
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/california-mask-mandate-expire-february-15/
GIST	<p>California will end its indoor masking requirement for vaccinated people next week but masks still are the rule for schoolchildren, state health officials announced Monday amid rapidly falling coronavirus cases.</p> <p>After February 15, unvaccinated people still will be required to be masked indoors, and everyone — vaccinated or not — will have to wear masks in higher-risk areas like public transit and nursing homes and other congregate living facilities, officials said. Local governments can continue their own indoor masking requirements and last week, Los Angeles County's health officials said they intend to keep theirs in place beyond the state deadline.</p> <p>State officials also announced that Indoor "mega events" with more than 1,000 people will have to require vaccinations or negative tests for those attending and those who are unvaccinated will be required to wear masks. For outdoor events with more than 10,000 people, there is no vaccination requirement but masks or negative tests are recommended.</p> <p>Those thresholds increase from the current 500 attendees for indoor and 5,000 attendees for outdoor events. The increased threshold comes after Sunday's Super Bowl that will draw as many as 100,000 football fans to SoFi Stadium outside Los Angeles.</p>

With coronavirus cases falling fast, California also is lifting a requirement that people produce a negative coronavirus test before visiting hospitals and nursing homes, effective immediately.

"Omicron has loosened its hold on California, vaccines for children under 5 are around the corner, and access to COVID-19 treatments is improving," said state Public Health Officer Dr. Tomás J. Aragón. "With things moving in the right direction, we are making responsible modifications to COVID-19 prevention measures, while also continuing to develop a longer-term action plan for the state."

California has seen a 65% drop in case rates since the peak during the wintertime Omicron surge.

Governor Gavin Newsom's administration brought back the masking mandate in mid-December as Omicron gained momentum and last month extended the requirement through February 15. California passed 80,000 pandemic deaths and 8 million confirmed positive cases last week but new cases, hospitalizations and ICU admissions all continued falling Monday and are projected to keep declining at a rapid clip.

Before resuming the masking requirement in December, California had lifted the requirement for people who were vaccinated as of June 15, a date that Newsom had described then as the state's grand reopening. However, many counties soon reinstituted local mask orders as the summer Delta surge took hold.

Newsom, a Democrat, has come under pressure from Republicans and other critics to ease the mandates. He recently has said the state is preparing for the day when the coronavirus can be considered endemic, with rules that accept that it is here to stay but can be managed with caution.

"We are glad to see Governor Newsom remove mask mandates on adults, especially since he and other elected officials violate these rules flagrantly in public," said Jonathan Keller, president of the conservative California Family Council, referring to Newsom and others removing their masks at a football game last month. "But this isn't good enough. We should free our children as well, especially since COVID-19 poses the least danger to minors out of any age group."

Health officials said Monday that more changes to the state's policies will be released in the coming week.

The developments in California come as New Jersey and Delaware announced plans Monday to lift the statewide COVID-19 mask requirement in schools next month. They are among a dozen states with mask mandates in schools.

California health officials said Monday that they are "continuing to work with education, public health and community leaders to update masking requirements at schools to adapt to changing conditions and ensure the safety of kids, teachers, and staff."

Last week, Los Angeles County public health director Barbara Ferrer said the winter surge will be considered over in the nation's most populous county when hospitalizations fall below 2,500 for seven days in a row. The county will then end its mask requirement for large outdoor events such as concerts and sporting events and for outdoor spaces at schools and child-care facilities.

It plans to keep indoor mask requirements in place until the county has two straight weeks at or below a "moderate" rate of 50 new cases per 100,000 people and there aren't any reports of a new, troubling variant circulating, Ferrer said. The current rate is 117 cases per 100,000 people.

Health officials continue emphasizing that those most at risk for the virus are the unvaccinated, and that booster shots in particular provide significant protection from serious illness, hospitalization and death.

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HEADLINE	02/07 New Zealand anti-vax, mandate protesters
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/zealand-convoy-protesters-clog-streets-parliament-82735576

GIST	<p>WELLINGTON, New Zealand -- Hundreds of people protesting vaccine and mask mandates drove in convoy to New Zealand's capital on Tuesday and converged outside Parliament as lawmakers reconvened after a summer break.</p> <p>The mostly unmasked protesters had driven from around the country, and their vehicles clogged the central Wellington streets for hours as they got out to meet and speak on Parliament's forecourt.</p> <p>Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern elected not to meet with them as she delivered a speech to lawmakers outlining her priorities for the year.</p> <p>Among the protesters' grievances is the requirement in New Zealand that certain workers get vaccinated against the coronavirus, including teachers, doctors, nurses, police and military personnel.</p> <p>Many protesters also oppose mask mandates — such as those in stores and among children over about age 8 in school classrooms — and champion the ideal of more “freedom.”</p> <p>New Zealand was spared the worst of the pandemic after it closed its borders and implemented strict lockdowns, limiting the spread of the virus. The nation has reported just 53 virus deaths among its population of 5 million.</p> <p>But some have grown weary of the restrictions. Ardern last week said the country would end its quarantine requirements for incoming travelers in stages as it reopened its borders.</p> <p>With about 77% of New Zealanders fully vaccinated, Ardern has also promised she won't impose more lockdowns.</p> <p>Health officials have been reporting about 200 new virus cases each day as an outbreak of the omicron variant grows. Fourteen people are currently hospitalized because of the virus.</p> <p>Police said Tuesday afternoon they hadn't made any arrests and that protest organizers had asked protesters to move their cars and trucks by 5 p.m., ahead of the evening rush hour.</p> <p>Wellington council officials had earlier indicated they were reluctant to issue tickets or order motorists to move, saying on social media, “We must consider the safety of our staff and do not want to put them in harm’s way.”</p> <p>In her speech, Ardern told lawmakers that her government's guiding principles during the pandemic had been to protect lives and livelihoods, and it had done that with its strong health response which helped cushion the blow to the economy, leading to record-low unemployment and strong GDP growth.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Justice Dept. to allow safe injection sites?
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/justice-dept-signals-safe-injection-sites-82729845
GIST	<p>NEW YORK -- A year after winning a major court battle against the opening of so-called safe injection sites -- safe havens for people to use heroin and other narcotics with protections against fatal overdoses — the Justice Department is signaling it might be open to allowing them.</p> <p>In response to questions from The Associated Press, the Justice Department said it is “evaluating” such facilities and talking to regulators about “appropriate guardrails.”</p> <p>The position is a drastic change from its stance in the Trump administration, when prosecutors fought vigorously against a plan to open a safe consumption site in Philadelphia. The Justice Department won a lawsuit last year, when a federal appeals court in Pennsylvania ruled that opening such a facility would violate a 1980s-era drug law, aimed at “crackhouses,” which bans operating a place for taking illegal drugs. The Supreme Court declined in October to take the case.</p>

About six weeks later, the first officially authorized safe injection sites opened in New York City in November. The two facilities — which the city calls “overdose prevention centers” — provide a monitored place for drug users to partake, with staffers and supplies on hand to reverse overdoses. New York City is in a different appeals court jurisdiction that has not ruled on the centers.

Such sites exist in Canada, Australia and Europe and have been discussed for years in New York and some other U.S. cities and states. A few unofficial facilities have operated for some time.

Advocates have hailed them as a way to curb the scourge of overdose deaths. Drawing from the latest available death certificate data, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that more than 100,000 Americans died of drug overdoses from May 2020 to April 2021.

Critics, however, argue that safe injection sites encourage illegal drug use and burden neighborhoods.

For months after President Joe Biden took office last year, the Justice Department — under Attorney General Merrick Garland — had refused to take a public stance on safe consumption sites. Officials now say they are weighing their use.

“Although we cannot comment on pending litigation, the Department is evaluating supervised consumption sites, including discussions with state and local regulators about appropriate guardrails for such sites, as part of an overall approach to harm reduction and public safety,” the agency said in a statement Friday to the AP.

The New York City sites so far have intervened in more than 125 overdoses among more than 640 users, many of whom have made multiple visits, according to OnPoint NYC, the organization running them.

Executive Director Sam Rivera said he was excited and relieved by the Justice Department's statement. The group is eager to tell the agency about its work, he said.

“I believe they're going to land in the right place here and we'll be able to, together, really expand on this health initiative that's saving lives every day,” he said.

Former Mayor Bill de Blasio, a Democrat whose administration allowed the centers to open, said the city's attorneys believed that the federal statute is “aimed at drug trafficking, not at medical facilities,” as he characterized the consumption sites.

But U.S. Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, a New York City Republican, has urged Garland to work to shut them down, citing the appeals court ruling against the Philadelphia proposal last year. She told Garland in November that it is “imperative that you enforce this legal precedent,” and she wasn't pleased to hear about the new Justice Department statement.

“Instead of stopping the deadly drugs streaming over our border, putting drug dealers behind bars and helping people receive the long-term treatment they need to overcome addiction, Democrat leadership is enabling illegal drug use,” Malliotakis said in a statement.

The Philadelphia project, called Safehouse, is still fighting for court approval to open. Safehouse lawyers Ronda Goldfein and Ilana Eisenstein said they hoped the Justice Department's new statement “signals the prospect of a positive resolution, not just for Philadelphia but for any place in America that seeks to provide overdose prevention services.”

Some other arms of the federal government also have signaled some willingness at least to explore safe injection facilities, if not yet embrace them. Asked about the New York sites, White House drug czar Dr. Rahul Gupta told CNN in December he was “interested in looking at the science and data behind all of the emerging harm reduction practices.”

	Later that month, the National Institutes of Health issued a call for harm reduction research that mentioned safe consumption sites, among other approaches.
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HEADLINE	02/07 Experts: too soon end mask mandates
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/doctors-warn-ending-school-mask-mandates-lead-rise/story?id=82722570
GIST	<p>Several states across the country are considering lifting mask mandates in schools in an attempt to return to some semblance of normalcy.</p> <p>New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy and Delaware Gov. John Carney announced Monday that mask mandates in schools will come to an end in March. Illinois school districts will be deciding whether or not to make masks optional after a judge ruled against the state's mandate.</p> <p>Additionally, Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin issued an executive order last month allowing parents to choose whether their child will wear a mask in schools, although it was temporarily halted by a judge Friday.</p> <p>Experts say it is too soon to end mask mandates in schools because vaccination rates are not high enough yet among the school-age population and new cases are still being reported.</p> <p>"It is not safe at this time for schools to rescind mask mandates [because] even though we do have decent levels of vaccination in the older age groups, as populations get younger, the proportion who are vaccinated gets lower," Dr. Mercedes Carnethon, vice chair of the department of preventive medicine and a professor of epidemiology and pulmonary and critical care at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, told ABC News.</p> <p>Currently, 22.6% of Americans ages 5 to 11 and 56.4% of those ages 12 to 17 are fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>"The proportion of parents who have chosen vaccination for their children is very low and we know that masking works to stop the spread of the coronavirus," Carnethon said. "Rescinding those mandates where children 5 and up spend their days, I believe we will see rapid spread."</p> <p>Proponents of mask mandates say COVID-19 is not an endemic disease yet and lifting mandates will trigger a major rise in cases.</p> <p>In Wyoming, Laramie County School District 1 -- located in the capital of Cheyenne -- reported a spike in cases just two weeks after the Board of Trustees voted to end the mask mandate.</p> <p>First reported by the Wyoming Tribune Eagle, nearly 400 students and 100 staff have tested positive between Jan. 24 and Feb. 4, an ABC analysis of school district data shows.</p> <p>Similarly, Hopkinton High School in Massachusetts was the first public school in the state to drop masks altogether but reinstituted the mandate after a rise in cases.</p> <p>Murphy said a drop in COVID-19 infections linked to the omicron variant led him to lift the mask mandate.</p> <p>"Balancing public health with getting back to some semblance of normalcy is not easy," Murphy tweeted. "But we can responsibly take this step due to declining COVID numbers and growth in vaccinations."</p> <p>Dr. Stanley Weiss, a professor of biostatistics & epidemiology at Rutgers School of Public Health, called it a politically motivated decision.</p>

"Gov. Murphy's decision is a politically-based one because there is tremendous pressure coming upon everyone to get rid of the pandemic and stop talking about it and stop dealing with it because we're all tired of this pandemic," he told ABC News. "It is not scientifically based and I don't think it is a rational approach based upon what we're still seeing."

According to Patch New Jersey, in-school transmission in the state has increased over the past month.

Between Jan. 4 and Jan. 10, there were 11 cases among students and 17 cases among staff. However, between Jan. 25 and Jan. 31, there were 398 cases among students and 57 among staff.

"I have problems with the change in policy," Weiss said. "Yes, it's a limited number of cases, but if you look over time, the new outbreaks have been continuing to increase in schools. The number of student cases and staff cases has not declined. It hasn't gone away."

In Illinois, some districts have already made mandates optional after a judge ruled school districts statewide cannot require students to wear masks in classrooms.

"If data were driving these decisions, we wouldn't at all remove mask mandates right now," said Carnethon. "The school districts in the regions of Illinois that are making this optional appear to be closely aligned with the geopolitical sentiment."

Carnethon said districts where schools mask mandates are being removed are typically ones with limited testing ability and "limited enthusiasm" for policies such as requiring vaccinations in public spaces.

"These communities continue to be high-district transmission communities. These are the very decisions that are going to prolong the pandemic and lead to far more suffering than we need to have happen," she said.

Those in favor of ending the mandates in schools say the public health focus needs to shift to learning to live with COVID-19 and more attention should be given to individual choice.

An increase in cases isn't necessarily a bad thing due to children's low risk of severe illness, according to some experts. Others, like Dr. Julia Raifman, disagree.

"I think cases are a problem," Raifman, an assistant professor of health law, policy and management at Boston University School of Public Health who researches state-level policy responses to the pandemic, told ABC News.

She continued, "Cases are a problem because more cases do mean more hospitalizations and deaths. There's no way around that. More cases mean more missed work and more missed school. More cases mean more people with lingering symptoms. More cases mean more of the unknown health impacts 10 years later."

Raifman added that school mask mandates should not disappear completely and that one way to keep them in place is to have more outdoor class time for kids because masks are not recommended for outdoors and students and teachers could take a break from wearing face coverings.

She gave the example of Nevada, which has a policy that enacts mask mandates when cases in a county are high.

"If people are really eager for them to end, I recommend that they not end them, that they put in place a data-driven approach that turns on the mask policies when we need them when there are big surges," Raifman said.

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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/haiti-braces-instability-amid-grim-anniversary-82724296
GIST	<p>PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Schools and businesses across Haiti shuttered their doors on Monday and large numbers of police patrolled the streets as the country confronted a grim anniversary.</p> <p>Monday marked not only seven months since President Jovenel Moïse was slain at his private residence but also the end of his term, with opponents demanding that Prime Minister Ariel Henry step down, arguing that his administration is unconstitutional.</p> <p>Henry brushed aside those criticisms during a press conference on Monday evening where he again pledged to create a provisional electoral council to pave the way for general elections. He noted that exactly 36 years ago, former Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier fled the country amid a violent uprising.</p> <p>“Thirty-six years later, we must realize that we have failed to establish a truly democratic system,” Henry said, adding that for every three steps forward, the country goes back two steps.</p> <p>Henry blamed the economy for most of Haiti’s ongoing problems, saying it was too small to allow people to live well, get jobs or obtain good government services. He said his administration is fighting to reduce a surge in violence and is looking for more resources to help those in need.</p> <p>“We know there is a lot of misery out there,” he said.</p> <p>Thousands of people opted to stay home on Monday, afraid that even greater violence would erupt as Haiti’s political instability deepens, kidnappings spike and gangs grow more powerful amid a crumbling economy as they prey on those in need. Lionel Fortuné, a 33-year-old law student, was among the few who ventured outside and waited a long time for a public bus to materialize on the empty streets.</p> <p>“This country has totally deteriorated,” he said. “You don’t know who you can count on, who you can trust to lead the country to the right path.”</p> <p>Henry has promised to hold general elections by the end of this year as his administration tries to improve security conditions.</p> <p>Haiti currently has only 10 elected officials since it failed to hold legislative elections in October 2019 amid political gridlock and massive protests, with Moïse ruling by decree for more than a year before was killed. Since then, numerous opponents have challenged Henry and nominated their own leaders, moves that the prime minister has not recognized.</p> <p>“The basic thing today is not to fight for a short-lived piece of power,” Henry said. “No one has the authority or the right to meet at a hotel or abroad to decide in a small committee who is to be president or prime minister. All this is a distraction.”</p> <p>Bocchit Edmond, Haiti’s ambassador to the U.S., echoed those thoughts in an interview with The Associated Press, saying that Henry did not make himself prime minister but rather was chosen by a legitimate and democratically elected president. He said the process of choosing an electoral council was very well advanced and called on opponents to dialogue with Henry and work together, adding that he remains optimistic elections will be held.</p> <p>“My only fear is to see my country not moving forward,” Edmond said.</p> <p>He dismissed accusations that Henry is not considered a legitimate leader given that Haiti’s chief public prosecutor, whom Henry has since fired, noted that the prime minister spoke with one of the main suspects in the presidential slaying hours after it occurred. Henry has said he received multiple calls that day and doesn’t remember all of them.</p> <p>“It’s an ongoing investigation,” Edmond said. “Let us leave (this to) the justice system.”</p>

	<p>One of the most high-profile groups that oppose Henry, the Montana Accord, named after the hotel where it was signed, has proposed a two-year transitional period to allow Haiti time to create a safer environment for voters. The group, made up of thousands of supporters including prominent politicians and civil society leaders, recently nominated as its leader Fritz Jean, former governor of the Bank of the Republic of Haiti.</p> <p>In a speech on Saturday, Jean said he plans to reach out to more groups and political parties to find solutions to Haiti's issues and noted that violence is not the road to democracy.</p> <p>As political figures keep vying to be Haiti's new leader, Fortuné, the law student, lamented the spike in prices of basic food staples and accused the government of not doing anything to improve people's lives: "The economy has hit rock bottom. It can't go farther than it has. No one can really survive."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Canada pushes back US support to protests
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/canada-pushes-back-gop-support-covid-protests-82730346
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, Ontario -- Canada's public safety minister said Monday that U.S. officials should stay out of his country's domestic affairs, joining other Canadian leaders in pushing back against prominent Republicans who offered support for the protests of COVID-19 restrictions that have besieged downtown Ottawa for more than a week.</p> <p>A day after the city declared a state of emergency, the mayor pleaded for almost 2,000 extra police officers to help quell the raucous nightly demonstrations staged by the so-called Freedom Truck Convoy, which has used hundreds of parked trucks to paralyze the Canadian capital's business district. The protests have also infuriated people who live around downtown, including neighborhoods near Parliament Hill, the seat of the federal government.</p> <p>"Individuals are trying to blockade our economy, our democracy, and our fellow citizens' daily lives," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in an emergency debate in Parliament, while the protest continued outside. "It has to stop."</p> <p>Trudeau said everyone is tired of COVID-19 but this is not the way. He said the restrictions won't last forever and noted that Canada has one of the highest vaccination rates in the world. "Canadians trust science," Trudeau said.</p> <p>"A few people shouting and waving swastikas does not define who Canadians are."</p> <p>Protests unfolded elsewhere too. A truck-convoy protest near the Ambassador Bridge, the busiest border crossing between Canada and the U.S., caused long traffic backups along the span from the Detroit side of the Detroit River. And in Alaska, more than 100 truck drivers rallied in support of their counterparts in Canada by driving the 10 miles from Anchorage to Eagle River, the Anchorage Daily News reported.</p> <p>Many members of the GOP have made comments supporting the demonstrations, including former President Donald Trump, who called Trudeau a "far left lunatic" who has "destroyed Canada with insane COVID mandates."</p> <p>Protesters have said they will not leave until all vaccine mandates and COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. They also called for the removal of Trudeau's government, though it is responsible for few of the restrictive measures, most of which were put in place by provincial governments.</p> <p>Prominent Republicans including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton complained after crowdfunding site GoFundMe said it would refund the vast majority of the millions of dollars raised by demonstrators.</p>

The site said it cut off funding for protest organizers after determining that their efforts violated the site's terms of service by engaging in unlawful activity. Ontario Provincial Premier Doug Ford has called the protest an occupation.

In response, Paxton tweeted: "Patriotic Texans donated to Canadian truckers' worthy cause." Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said on Fox News that "government doesn't have the right to force you to comply to their arbitrary mandates."

Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino shot back: "It is certainly not the concern of the Texas attorney general as to how we in Canada go about our daily lives in accordance with the rule of law."

"We need to be vigilant about potential foreign interference ... Whatever statements may have been made by some foreign official are neither here nor there. We're Canadian. We have our own set of laws. We will follow them," Mendicino said.

In a letter to Trudeau and the public safety minister, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson said "what was initially described as a peaceful protest has now turned into a siege of our downtown area" with 400 to 500 trucks. He asked for 1,800 additional police officers. That would nearly double the existing resources of the entire Ottawa Police Service, which has 2,100 police and civilian members.

Dominic LeBlanc, the minister of intergovernmental affairs, blamed the GOP interference for inciting disorderly conduct and helping to fund entities that are not respecting Canadian law. Emergency Preparedness Minister Bill Blair said Paxton was wrong for commenting on it.

Bruce Heyman, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada, said groups in the U.S. need to stop funding and interfering in the domestic affairs of America's neighbor.

On the street in front of Parliament Hill were thousands of signs ranging from "no more mandates" and "freedom of choice" to "truck you Trudeau" and some compared vaccine mandates to fascism.

Trudeau has called the protesters a "fringe," but he faces calls by the opposition Conservative party to extend an "olive branch" to them. Some Conservative lawmakers, including one running to lead the party, have met and posted for pictures with them.

Embattled Ottawa Police Chief Peter Sloly called the demonstration an "unprecedented protest never seen in Canada" and acknowledged that authorities failed to plan for it to last more than three days.

Steve Bell, the city's deputy police chief, said a person from Ohio was arrested in connection with a threat against Ottawa police headquarters.

Meanwhile, Ottawa police were investigating a fire at an apartment building that was apparently set by protesters. Matias Munoz said residents of the building south of Parliament Hill were already at their wits' end Saturday night as the noise of the protest blared through their homes for the ninth night in a row.

When he came downstairs Sunday morning, Munoz said the carpet and floor were charred, and there were blackened fire-starter bricks strewn across the lobby.

Surveillance video showed two men light a package of the bricks in the lobby and tape or tie the front door handles together before leaving through a side door before dawn. The video also showed a different man entering the building and putting the fire out a short while later, Munoz said.

"Somebody trying to do something as insidious as taping the door shut so people can't leave if there's a fire in the main lobby — it's terror, is what it is," Munoz said.

Ottawa police declined to release details, citing the ongoing investigation.

	In other developments, Ontario Superior Court Justice Hugh McLean granted a 10-day injunction to prevent truckers parked on city streets in downtown Ottawa from honking their horns incessantly.
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HEADLINE	02/07 Australia political leaders apologize to staff
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/australian-political-leaders-apologize-staff-abuses-82736858
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia -- Australian political leaders apologized to staffers who have endured decades of bullying, harassment and sexual assault inside Parliamentary House and other government offices.</p> <p>The presiding officers of the House of Representatives and Senate delivered the apology Tuesday on behalf of a cross-section of parties as part of a statement acknowledging a toxic workplace culture.</p> <p>That culture was exposed by Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins' investigation.</p> <p>The investigation was triggered by former government staffer Brittany Higgins, who went public a year ago with her allegation that she had been raped by a more senior colleague in a minister's Parliament House office weeks before the 2019 election.</p> <p>Higgins said she felt she had to make a choice between reporting her allegations to police or continuing her career. She quit her government job in January last year and reported her allegation to police.</p> <p>Higgins was one of seven women who were given exemptions from a pandemic ban on viewers sitting in the public gallery of the House.</p> <p>Prime Minister Scott Morrison thanked Higgins for the courage she had shown in making her allegations.</p> <p>"I am sorry. We are sorry. I'm sorry to Ms. Higgins for the terrible things that took place here," Morrison told Parliament.</p> <p>"The place that should have been a place of safety and contribution turned out to be a nightmare. But I'm sorry for far more than that. For all of those who came before Ms. Higgins and endured the same, but she had the courage to speak, and so here we are," Morrison added.</p> <p>The Associated Press does not usually identify alleged victims of sexual assault, but Higgins has chosen to identify herself in the media.</p> <p>More than 1,700 people made contributions to Jenkins' report, including past and present staffers.</p> <p>Her report found 37% of people currently in parliamentary workplaces had experienced bullying and 33% had experienced sexual harassment.</p> <p>Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce told Parliament he joined in the apology and in "acknowledging that we will do better."</p> <p>Revelations in 2018 that Joyce was expecting a baby with former press secretary Vikki Campion led to then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull banning his ministers from having sex with staff. Morrison has maintained the ban.</p> <p>Joyce in 2018 was married with four children. He has since married Campion with whom he has had two children.</p> <p>House Speaker Andrew Wallace told Parliament action was already being taken to improve the workplace culture.</p>

	<p>Last year, an independent complaints process was established. Lawmakers and staff had also undergone professional workplace training, Wallace said.</p> <p>Higgins' former colleague Bruce Lehrmann has pleaded not guilty to a charge of sexual intercourse without consent and is scheduled to stand trial in a Canberra court in June.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Deadly cyclone devastates Madagascar
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/cyclone-batsirai-leaves-dozen-dead-thousands-homeless-madagascar/story?id=82719663
GIST	<p>LONDON -- More than a dozen people are dead and thousands are homeless after a tropical storm struck Madagascar over the weekend, the second storm to batter the island nation in weeks.</p> <p>Cyclone Batsirai made landfall on Madagascar's eastern coast late Saturday before sweeping across the central and southern parts on Sunday. The storm departed Madagascar on Monday morning and returned to sea, but heavy rainfall is forecast for southern Madagascar through Tuesday, according to the country's meteorology department, fueling fears of more flooding.</p> <p>The cyclone's torrential rains and powerful winds flooded roads and farmland, ripped roofs from homes and buildings and knocked down trees and utility poles.</p> <p>According to Madagascar's National Office for Risk and Disaster Management, at least 20 people have died and an estimated 69,000 others have been displaced from their homes due to Batsirai, which was classified by the country's meteorology department as dangerous.</p> <p>Hundreds of schools were affected by the storm, leaving an estimated 9,271 children out of school. The cyclone also damaged various infrastructure, including disruptions to power and water supplies in some areas, the National Office for Risk and Disaster Management said.</p> <p>The worst-affected areas were on the eastern side of the country, though the full scope of the damage was still being assessed Monday.</p> <p>Humanity & Inclusion, a France-based independent charity that has worked in Madagascar for over 30 years, has a 163-person team on the ground helping authorities evaluate and respond to the disaster. Vincent Dalonneau, Humanity & Inclusion's director for Madagascar, told ABC News that the effects of Batsirai "are devastating."</p> <p>"The amount of destruction is significant and for many this is only the beginning. The storm may have passed, but now the affected communities must restart from scratch -- rebuilding their homes, schools and hospitals," Dalonneau said.</p> <p>"Right now, we only have initial estimates of the damage caused. What remains a great challenge is that more isolated areas have yet to be assessed. So, we expect to see the extent of destruction rising in the coming days as we get a clearer image of the situation."</p> <p>Dalonneau said some isolated villages are more than a two-day walk away, which make damage assessments and aid deliveries even more difficult.</p> <p>One of the affected residents was a 32-year-old single mother named Josephine. She said she and her young daughter evacuated their home near the eastern city of Mahanoro on Friday night amid heavy rain. When they returned, she said their house was "completely destroyed," according to Humanity & Inclusion.</p> <p>Batsirai, which means help in Shona, an official language in Zimbabwe, arrived less than two weeks after Tropical Storm Ana barreled through southeastern Africa, killing scores of people in Madagascar, Mozambique and Malawi.</p>

HEADLINE	02/07 Report: OD deaths cost \$1 trillion annually
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/overdose-deaths-cost-us-trillion-annually-bipartisan-report/story?id=82726941
GIST	<p>The drug overdose epidemic in the United States, now primarily driven by synthetic opioids like ultra-deadly fentanyl, costs the nation roughly \$1 trillion a year, according to a new bipartisan congressional report released Tuesday.</p> <p>"Whether measured in lives or in dollars, the United States' drug overdose epidemic should shock everyone," the report reads. "It is unacceptable."</p> <p>The report provides a unique level of comprehensive review into the opioid crisis, with particular emphasis on the need to improve mental health services and expand health care access for those suffering from addiction.</p> <p>A White House Council of Economic Advisers assessment pegged the cost of the opioid crisis at \$700 billion three years ago.</p> <p>The new report derives the new \$1 trillion estimate based on the increase in overdose deaths seen since 2018.</p> <p>Drug overdose deaths have more than doubled in recent years, from about 44,000 in 2013, to more than 100,000 between May 2020 and April 2021. Overdose incidents are responsible for more deaths in the U.S. each year than firearms, suicide, homicide or car crashes, according to the report.</p> <p>When it comes to understanding the demand for synthetic opioids, the report's authors wrote: "Authorities are largely flying blind."</p> <p>"The United States does not have the data infrastructure to adequately measure the amount of illegally manufactured synthetic opioids consumed in the United States or the number of people who use them," the report reads.</p> <p>Tracking fentanyl is difficult, especially when it comes mixed with other substances, including counterfeit pills, which users might not know are fake.</p> <p>A series of target raids done across the U.S. last year as part of a new crackdown on counterfeit prescription medication resulted in the seizure of 1.8 million fake pills, and authorities saw increases in the number that contained fentanyl, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration. The number of fentanyl-laced pills seized during the enforcement push at the time was enough to kill 700,000 people.</p> <p>"The United States has never experienced such a rapid and unprecedented shift in illegal drug markets, especially a shift that is causing so much death," the report reads.</p> <p>Rep. David Trone, D-Md., and Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., chair the bipartisan commission that produced the over 500-page report.</p> <p>Combating the opioid crisis is personal for Trone, as his 24-year-old nephew died from a fentanyl overdose in 2016. It was that family tragedy what has fueled his continued work on the issue.</p> <p>"We've got to put names behind these statistics, because we're numbed," Trone said. "We just hear these big numbers."</p>

Transnational criminal organizations rely on raw materials sourced from China and trafficking routes through Mexico to maintain an expansive supply chain which has funneled fake versions of Oxycontin, Vicodin and Xanax, or stimulants like Adderall.

"The cartels are entrepreneurs and are phenomenally powerful with \$100 billion-plus business and they have really shaped their drug to fit the American market," Trone said.

A significantly greater level of potency, about 50 times that of heroin, combined with being relatively easy to manufacture, makes fentanyl an attractive product for drug traffickers.

Counterfeit versions of real prescription drugs also create challenges in identifying the scope of the demand and marshaling resources for treatment, according to the congressional report.

"It's incomprehensible that our government's reaction has been so inadequate," Trone said.

The report recommends elevating the head of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to a cabinet level position and empowering the office to analyze trends and respond to threats more quickly.

This week, the DEA announced the launch of a new enforcement initiative aimed at dismantling illicit drug trafficking networks in communities across the country. A majority of the networks already identified by the DEA are known for distributing fentanyl or methamphetamines.

"DEA will bring all it has to bear to make our communities safer and healthier, and to reverse the devastating trends of drug-related violence and overdoses plaguing our Nation," the agency's chief administrator, Anne Milgram, said Monday.

But the new congressional report is clear to emphasize the need for a public health solution as well. Methadone and buprenorphine, two treatment medications designed to reduce opioid cravings and withdrawal symptoms, are identified as two of the most effective intervention methods.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	02/07 Israel spyware scandal intensifies
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-launches-investigation-into-ballooning-spyware-scandal-11644248434
GIST	<p>TEL AVIV—Israeli authorities launched a state inquiry on Monday into allegations that the country's police illicitly used spyware to hack the phones of political activists, senior government bureaucrats and people close to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.</p> <p>The national investigation, led by the public security minister who oversees the police, adds a new dimension to a political firestorm here over Israelis being targeted by homegrown spyware that infects smartphones.</p> <p>The investigation followed a report in Israeli newspaper Calcalist that police unlawfully targeted one of Mr. Netanyahu's sons and two of his top communication aides, along with mayors, ministry officials and a leading businessman. The uproar began in January with reports that police used spyware against political opponents of Mr. Netanyahu.</p> <p>On Monday, the allegations prompted calls for a thorough investigation from across Israel's political spectrum and from Israel's own national police commissioner, Kobi Shabtai, who took office in January 2021, after the period of alleged wrongdoing.</p> <p>"We cannot lose our democracy. We cannot lose our police. And surely, we cannot lose the faith of our public in them. This requires an in-depth and thorough investigation," said Israel's President Isaac Herzog.</p>

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett called the allegations “very serious.” He said spyware is an important tool in fighting terrorism and major crime but wasn’t intended for use in “phishing campaigns targeting the Israeli public or officials—which is why we need to understand exactly what happened.”

The allegations threatened to upend [Mr. Netanyahu’s trial on corruption charges](#), with his defense lawyers demanding in court on Monday a delay in the proceeding until it is determined whether evidence against him was obtained illegally. The judges suspended a hearing scheduled for Tuesday and asked the prosecution to submit a response to spying allegations by Tuesday afternoon, after which the court will determine whether the hearings will continue on Wednesday.

Prosecutors say Mr. Netanyahu accepted expensive gifts from wealthy businessmen in exchange for official favors and offered two media executives regulatory and financial benefits in exchange for positive press coverage. Mr. Netanyahu [has denied the charges](#), calling the investigation a witch hunt that was designed to bring down his government. His trial began in May 2020 and is expected to last for many more months if not years.

Prosecutors are working to determine whether one of their key witnesses slated to take the stand soon was pressed to flip against Mr. Netanyahu by investigators using evidence illegally obtained. They are also investigating whether other individuals connected to the investigations were illicitly spied on by the police.

At the heart of the allegations is whether the police used spyware without proper judicial oversight and against individuals not suspected of any major wrongdoing. Israeli police have backed off their initial denials of wrongdoing.

Israel’s police say they use a variety of spyware tools, including one developed by Israel’s NSO Group, known for its [Pegasus software](#), which can completely take over a smartphone without the target knowing. The police haven’t said how similar their spyware is to Pegasus, only that Israeli law allows them limited access.

The police say spyware is crucial for tracking criminal activity amid [a rise in the use of encrypted software in phone apps](#) like WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal. NSO says its software is meant to help law enforcement save lives and stop crime, and that it terminates contracts with clients that misuse the platform.

Some privacy advocates have said the use of spyware in Israel is illegal. They say the current laws were designed to allow law-enforcement officials to listen to conversations, and not to take control of smartphones and gain unfettered access to a person’s data.

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HEADLINE	02/08 Vodafone Portugal suffers cyberattack
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/cyberattack-brings-down-vodafone-portugal-mobile-voice-and-tv-services/
GIST	<p>Vodafone Portugal said today that a large chunk of its customer data services went offline overnight following “a deliberate and malicious cyberattack intended to cause damage and disruption.”</p> <p>The company’s 4G and 5G mobile networks, along with fixed voice, television, SMS, and voice/digital answering services are still offline following the attack.</p> <p>“We have already recovered mobile voice services and mobile data services are available exclusively on the 3G network in almost the entire country but, unfortunately, the scale and seriousness of the criminal act to which we were subjected implies careful and prolonged work for all other services,” the company said in a statement published earlier today.</p> <p>Vodafone said it’s working on restoring the remaining services throughout the day, with the help of local and international teams in what currently is the largest cybersecurity incident the company has ever dealt with.</p>

	<p>The company also said it's working with authorities to investigate the incident and that based on current evidence, customer data doesn't appear to have been accessed or compromised.</p> <p>Although despite the presence of some rumors online, Vodafone Portugal has not attributed the ongoing incident to a ransomware attack.</p> <p>These rumors are currently making waves online because over the past month, a ransomware gang had extorted Impresa and Cofina, two of Portugal's largest news media outlets. The Lapsus\$ ransomware gang, which was behind the two attacks, has not taken credit for the Vodafone Portugal outage on any of its online accounts.</p> <p>Contacted via LinkedIn, a Vodafone Portugal employee said they were only aware of the technical outage and were not aware of the company's press release attributing the outage to a cyberattack, suggesting details about what happened on the night between February 7 and February 8 have yet to be uncovered or shared internally.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Ransomware gangs changing tactics
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/ransomware-gangs-are-changing-their-tactics-that-could-prove-very-expensive-for-some-victims/
GIST	<p>The cost and risk of executing ransomware attacks is going up, making it harder for cyber criminals to carry them out, which could lead to a decline in the number of overall ransomware attacks. But that could mean some ransomware victims end up paying a heavier price.</p> <p>Ransomware is still running rampant, with several major incidents in the past week alone, but according to analysis by cybersecurity company Coveware, there are signs that recent changes could reduce the total number of ransomware attacks.</p> <p>But while the number of attacks could fall, there's the possibility that the ransom demands made by successful ransomware groups could rise.</p> <p>A number of developments are likely to have improved cybersecurity of enterprises, making them more robust against attacks. These developments include the Biden administration's executive orders across US government agencies, the Colonial Pipeline bringing ransomware to the forefront of CEO's minds, and moves by cyber-insurance providers to require improved cybersecurity protocols before a policy is taken out or renewed.</p> <p>But it's the rise in arrests relating to involvement in ransomware attacks that is cited as the biggest change to the ransomware landscape, with the arrest of several suspected REvil ransomware affiliates in Russia described as the most notable.</p> <p>According to analysis by Coveware, this move has increased the risk profile of being involved with ransomware attacks, and thus decreases the pool of cyber criminals, because some will decide the potential for being arrested and extradited isn't worth the risk – to the extent that some are quitting.</p> <p>"The cost and risk of executing ransomware attacks are up, and if this trend continues, we expect to see the aggregate volume of attacks begin to decrease," said researchers.</p> <p>However, while a decrease in the number of attacks would be a positive overall, it could potentially come with an unwelcome side effect – the cost of ransom demands going up, particularly for less high-profile victims.</p> <p>According to Coveware, the average ransom payment during the final three months of 2021 was \$322,168, more than double the figure of the previous quarter.</p>

This rise comes following what researchers describe as a "tactical shift" towards targeting companies that are large enough to pay significant ransom amounts but are small enough that the attackers don't have to spend a lot of time and effort on preparing and launching the attack.

Researchers warn that this shift in tactics is likely to continue, citing an [interview with a LockBit ransomware affiliate](#) as detailing the mindset behind the change.

"You can hit the jackpot once, but provoke such a geopolitical conflict that you will be quickly found. It is better to quietly receive stable small sums from mid-sized companies," they said.

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HEADLINE	02/08 Palestinian hacking group evolving
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/palestine-hackers-molerats-nimblemamba/
GIST	<p>A Palestinian-aligned hacking group has targeted Middle Eastern governments, foreign policy think tanks and a state-affiliated airline with a new malware implant as part of “highly targeted intelligence collection campaigns,” according to research published Tuesday.</p> <p>The findings, from researchers with cybersecurity firm Proofpoint, unpack the latest activities of an established and well-documented Arabic-speaking hacking group known as MoleRATs and its deployment of a new intelligence-gathering trojan they call “NimbleMamba.”</p> <p>The malware serves an intelligence-gathering trojan and, according to the researchers, is likely designed gain initial access to a target system.</p> <p>The group has gone after targets worldwide over the years, but Tuesday’s research examines campaigns against an unnamed Middle East government, foreign policy think tanks and a state-affiliated airline starting in August 2021 and continuing into January 2022.</p> <p>The operators behind MoleRATs — also known as TA402 — are “evolving their techniques and creating these very nicely done, specific and well-targeted campaigns,” Sherrod DeGrippe, Proofpoint’s vice president, threat research and detection, told CyberScoop.</p> <p>In June 2021 Proofpoint researchers analyzed MoleRATs malware known as LastConn, which was designed to gain access and conduct information gathering activities. After that publication, “TA402 appeared to halt its activities for a short period of time, almost certainly to retool,” the researchers say in the new report.</p> <p>After the retooling, the group began to use NimbleMamba and another piece of malware Proofpoint calls BrittleBush, which is likely an updated version of malware first reported by cybersecurity firm Cybereason in 2020 known as SharpStage.</p> <p>Custom lures and more</p> <p>The latest operations were seen being delivered against targets in one of several ways. In November 2021 the hackers masqueraded as the Quora website. If a target system’s IP address fit into one of about two-dozen geofenced country codes, the user would be redirected to a domain that would serve the NimbleMamba malware. If not, the user would be redirected to a legitimate news site.</p> <p>Another campaign, in December 2021, used target-specific lures such as medical information or confidential geopolitical material, and served malware from Dropbox URLs. The popular online filesharing service was also used for command and control functions by the hackers, according to Proofpoint, but the company took “the needed actions for neutralizing the activity” once notified by Proofpoint.</p> <p>A third campaign, taking place between December and January, used custom lures for each target but added a hacker-controlled WordPress URL to deliver the malware. Like the November 2021 campaign, the hacker-controlled URL allowed for attacks only on targets within certain countries.</p>

	<p>NimbleMamba contains “multiple capabilities designed to complicate both automated and manual analysis,” the researchers wrote, which lead the researchers to conclude that the malware is “actively being developed, is well-maintained, and designed for use in highly targeted intelligence collection campaigns.”</p> <p>DeGrippo noted that the campaigns in question showed MoleRATs creating custom attacks for specific targets, rather than generic lures for multiple targets at once. That suggests the group doesn’t have the resources to do it at scale, so they’re “going in and handcrafting these specifically for each of these targets, which means those targets are probably very valuable for them.”</p> <p>Tuesday’s Proofpoint analysis comes a week after researchers with Cisco’s Talos threat intelligence division published research on Arid Viper, a separate hacking group allegedly working in service of Palestinian espionage and information gathering. That research painted a picture of a group that while not “a technically evolved actor,” was sufficiently talented and motivated such to the point that it made it “particularly dangerous to organizations that may come into [its] crosshairs.”</p> <p>The Talos researchers concluded that the Arid Viper activity was an example of a group that’s “becoming more dangerous” over time as it evolves and refines its tools against its adversaries.</p> <p>While not commenting on the specifics of Talos’ research, DeGrippo agreed that the various Palestinian-aligned groups were a growing threat. “That region is growing in its capabilities, talent, and their evolution is accelerating,” DeGrippo said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Ransomware activity stays strong
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/lockbit-blackcat-swissport-ransomware-activity/178261/
GIST	<p>Law enforcement, C-suite executives and the cybersecurity community at-large have been laser-focused on stopping the expensive and disruptive barrage of ransomware attacks — and it appears to be working, at least to some extent. Nonetheless, recent moves from the LockBit 2.0 and BlackCat gangs, plus this weekend’s hit on the Swissport airport ground-logistics company, shows the scourge is far from over.</p> <p>It’s more expensive and riskier than ever to launch ransomware attacks, and ransomware groups have responded by mounting fewer attacks with higher ransomware demands, Coveware has reported, finding that the average ransomware payment in the fourth quarter of last year climbed by 130 percent to reach \$322,168. Likewise, Coveware found a 63 percent jump in the median ransom payment, up to \$117,116.</p> <p>Fewer Attacks, Bigger Ransom Demands</p> <p>“Average and median ransom payments increased dramatically during Q4, but we believe this change was driven by a subtle tactical shift by ransomware-as-a-service (RaaS) operations that reflected the increasing costs and risks previously described,” Coveware analysts said. “The tactical shift involves a deliberate attempt to extort companies that are large enough to pay a ‘big game’ ransom amount but small enough to keep attack operating costs and resulting media and law enforcement attention low.”</p> <p>That means ransomware groups have started to focus on small-to-medium sized businesses to avoid law-enforcement attention and publicity like what came with the Colonial Pipeline attack last year, Coveware added.</p> <p>Groups Looking to Lower Their Profile</p> <p>“The proportion of companies attacked in the 1,000- to 10,000-employee count size increased from 8 percent in Q3 to 14 percent in Q4,” the researchers found. “The average ransom payment in just this employee bucket was well north of one million dollars, which dragged the Q4 average and median amounts higher.”</p> <p>The Coveware team said it expects this trend will likely continue, led by the most prolific ransomware-as-a-service operators out there: Conti, LockBit 2.0 and Hive. Following splashy law-enforcement</p>

takedowns, including the [Russia's roundup of REvil members](#). Coveware predicted that these groups will try and keep a low profile.

“While all RaaS operations need to recruit affiliates, we expect groups to become more reserved in their public messaging and more careful about what companies they target,” Coveware researchers added. “The lessons learned from the pipeline attack and the recent FSB arrests are likely to keep some of the more vibrant displays of public bravado in check.”

But a lower profile doesn't mean ransomware operators aren't still honing their skills.

BlackCat's Rebrand, Triple-Extortion Threat

BlackCat, also known as ALPHV, an upstart [RaaS operation](#), is on the rise and rapidly recruiting affiliates, according to Tripwire's Graham Cluley, who explained that the group has started adding pressure for their victims to pay by not only stealing their data and threatening to release it, but also promising a crippling distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) should they refuse to pay — a ransomware tactic known as “[triple extortion](#).”

First discovered by the MalwareHunterTeam, the operators of the [Rust-coded BlackCat](#) ransomware call themselves ALPHV, but the MalwareHunterTeam dubbed them BlackCat after the image used on the payment page the victims must visit on Tor to pay, Bleeping Computer reported. The report also confirmed that BlackCat is essentially a re-brand, adding the group members have confirmed they were [previous members of the BlackMatter/DarkSide group](#).

LockBit 2.0 is another group adding pressure on its victims to pay with threats to release a company's customer data — and it hasn't been laying so low, either.

LockBit 2.0 recently took credit for breaching cryptocurrency exchange platform playbit.com, threat hunter DarkTracer tweeted. The researcher also posted a warning from LockBit2.0 that the group will publish the personal data of more than 100,000 of the platform's users unless the ransom is paid by Feb. 21.

“Customers from USA/WorldWide personal data, mail/hash, weak has algorithm,” the message read. “Admins personal data, admin emails and hashes. If you want it buy it — contact us with TOX.”

The following day, the FBI put out [indicators of compromise associated with LockBit 2.0](#) and asked anyone who thinks they might have been compromised by the group to contact the FBI Cyber Squad immediately.

“The FBI is seeking any information that can be shared, to include boundary logs showing communication to and from foreign IP addresses, a sample ransom note, communications with the threat actors, Bitcoin wallet information, the decryptor file, and/or a benign sample of an encrypted file,” the FBI alert said, adding that the department does not encourage paying ransoms, but understands business decisions need to be made to keep operations going.

Swissport Attack: Ransomware Still Going Strong

But even as ransomware operators are feeling new pressure, successful attacks are still being pulled off regularly.

Over the weekend, Swissport was taken down by a [ransomware attack](#) which caused the delay of 22 flights out of Zurich, Switzerland, according to an airport spokeswoman who spoke with Der Spiegel.

Bottom line? For now, ransomware is here to stay, but evolving.

The latest research from Trellix suggests that moving forward in 2022, financial services are going to be bombarded with [ransomware attacks](#). From the second to the third quarter of 2021, attacks on the finance and insurance sector increased by 21 percent, followed by just a 7 percent increase in healthcare attacks, the firm noted.

	“In the third quarter of 2021, high-profile ransomware groups disappeared, reappeared, reinvented, and even attempted to rebrand, while remaining relevant and prevalent as a popular and potentially devastating threat against an increasing spectrum of sectors,” Trellix chief scientist Raj Samani said.
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HEADLINE	02/08 Microsoft eyes malicious Office macros
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/microsoft-takes-aim-malicious/
GIST	<p>Microsoft has finally taken action against a common threat vector, blocking by default Office macros downloaded from the internet.</p> <p>A vast range of threat actors sent users phishing emails containing innocuous-looking attachments. However, they often contain embedded Visual Basic for Applications (VBA) macros obtained from the internet.</p> <p>Once enabled by users with a single click, these initiate a download of a malicious payload to support information theft, ransomware and other attacks.</p> <p>Microsoft’s latest action is intended to enable the continued use of legitimate macros while making it harder for threat actors to socially engineer users into enabling malicious content.</p> <p>“For macros in files obtained from the internet, users will no longer be able to enable content with a click of a button. A message bar will appear for users notifying them with a button to learn more. The default is more secure and is expected to keep more users safe including home users and information workers in managed organizations,” it explained.</p> <p>“Organizations can use the ‘Block macros from running in Office files from the internet’ policy to prevent users from inadvertently opening files from the internet that contain macros. Microsoft recommends enabling this policy, and if you do enable it, your organization won’t be affected by this default change.”</p> <p>The new rules will apply to the five most common Office apps: Access, Excel, PowerPoint, Visio, and Word. It will impact only Office running on Windows devices, with the changes rolled out from version 2203, starting with Current Channel (Preview) in early April 2022.</p> <p>Later, the change will be available in the other update channels, such as Current Channel, Monthly Enterprise Channel and Semi-Annual Enterprise Channel.</p> <p>Oliver Tavakoli, CTO at Vectra, argued that default settings matter in cybersecurity.</p> <p>“Seemingly 50-50 decisions made by product managers at application and platform providers can expose their customers to extraordinary risk. As the example of VBA macros demonstrates, once such a choice has been made it’s a difficult and lengthy process to change the default to something more secure as the fear of breaking things creates a form of institutional paralysis,” he added.</p> <p>“The security lesson is simple: leave features which may have security implications off by default and let customers choose whether the benefit of the feature outweighs the security risk of having it on.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/08 Report: 25% new online accounts fake
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/a-quarter-of-new-online-accounts/
GIST	<p>There was an 85% year-on-year increase in attacks targeting logins or account creation in 2021 as bot-driven fraud attempts soared, according to Arkose Labs.</p> <p>The fraud prevention firm analyzed over 150 billion transaction requests across 254 countries across the 12-month period to compile its latest report, <i>The 2022 State of Fraud and Account Security</i>.</p>

It found one in four newly created accounts were fake, one in five logins was an account takeover (ATO) attempt and a fifth (21%) of all traffic was linked to fraud.

ATOs are commonly used to steal personal and financial data or launch phishing attacks. Fraudulent new accounts could be used for “inventory hoarding, content scraping and sending spam and phishing messages,” according to Arkose Labs CEO and founder, Kevin Gosschalk.

“As expected, businesses that hit high-growth periods in 2021 saw an increase in attack. For example, gaming saw sky-high attacks in 2020 but leveled off in 2021, which led to attacks dispersing across other industries,” he told *Infosecurity*.

“Online media and entertainment continued to grow in popularity, bringing more in-platform spam and scam attacks. Attackers flocked to the travel industry to take advantage of scraping and inventory hoarding opportunities as the world shifted more toward post-pandemic normalcy.”

Driving most of these attacks is the use of intelligent, automated bots. Arkose Labs claimed that today’s bot signatures are three times more complex than those of previous years, making it even harder to discern real human behavior imposters.

Some 86% of attacks in 2021 were linked to bots, while bot-driven credential stuffing attempts peaked at 76 million per week. The Black Friday/Thanksgiving month of November was the worst hit.

The worst attacked sectors in the UK in 2021 were online gaming, accounting for 46% of all attacks, then social networks and online streaming sites, which comprised a third of malicious activity.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Medusa malware in Android SMS phishing
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/medusa-malware-ramps-up-android-sms-phishing-attacks/
GIST	<p>The Medusa Android banking Trojan is seeing increased infection rates as it targets more geographic regions to steal online credentials and perform financial fraud.</p> <p>Today, researchers at ThreatFabric have published a new report detailing the latest tricks employed by the Medusa malware and how it continues to evolve with new features.</p> <p>Medusa on the rise</p> <p>Medusa (aka TangleBot) is not a novel banking trojan, but it has seen increased distribution, with campaigns now targeting North America and Europe using the same distribution service as the notorious FluBot malware.</p> <p>BleepingComputer previously reported that the Medusa and FluBot trojans had previously used 'duckdns.org,' a free dynamic DNS abused as a delivery mechanism, so this is not the first sign of overlap between the two.</p> <p>In a new report by ThreatFabric, researchers have discovered that MedusaBot is now using the same service as FluBot to perform smishing (SMS phishing) campaigns.</p> <p>"The samples seen in side-by-side campaigns with Cabassous are identified by the actors themselves with the tags FLUVOICE, FLUFLASH and FLUDHL (possibly as a reference to the corresponding Cabassous/Flubot campaigns)," ThreatFabric explains in their report.</p> <p>The researchers believe that the Medusa threat actors began using this distribution service after seeing how widely spread and successful FluBot's campaigns had become.</p>

Medusa's main strength lies in its abuse of the Android 'Accessibility' scripting engine, which enables actors to perform various actions as if they were the user.

These actions are:

- **home_key** – Performs HOME global action
- **ges** – Executes a specified gesture on the screen of the device
- **fid_click** – Clicks on the UI element with the specified ID
- **sleep** – Sleeps (waits) for the specified number of microseconds
- **recent_key** – Shows overview of the recent apps
- **scrshot_key** – Performs TAKE_SCREENSHOT global action
- **notification_key** – Opens the active notifications
- **lock_key** – Locks the screen
- **back_key** – Performs BACK global action
- **text_click** – Clicks on the UI element that has specified text displayed
- **fill_text** – Not implemented yet

All in all, it's a highly capable banking trojan with keylogging features, live audio and video streaming, remote command execution options, and more.

ThreatFabric was able to gain access to the malware's backend administration panel and found that its operators can edit any field on any banking app running on the device. This feature allows the malware to target almost any banking platform with fake phishing login forms to steal credentials.

The malware is commonly distributed spoofed DHL or Purolator apps, but the researchers also saw packages masquerading as Android Update, Flash Player, Amazon Locker, and Video Player.

These APKs are manually installed by the victims themselves, who receive an SMS message with a URL leading to a site pushing the malicious Android app.

To prevent being infected by these malware infections, always treat strange URLs sent from your contact list as untrustworthy as they may have been sent by malware on the senders' device.

As always, do not, under any circumstance, download APKs from unknown websites, as they invariably lead to malware infections.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Puma data breach after ransomware attack
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/puma-hit-by-data-breach-after-kronos-ransomware-attack/
GIST	<p>Sportswear manufacturer Puma was hit by a data breach following the ransomware attack that hit Kronos, one of its North American workforce management service providers, in December 2021.</p> <p>The data breach notification filed with several attorney generals' offices earlier this month says the attackers also stole personal information belonging to Puma employees and their dependents from the Kronos Private Cloud (KPC) cloud environment before encrypting the data.</p> <p>Kronos describes KPC as secure storage protected from attacks using firewalls, multi-factor authentication, and encrypted transmissions.</p> <p>It's used as a server facility for hosting Workforce Central, Workforce TeleStaff, Enterprise Archive, TeleTime IP, Extensions for Healthcare (EHC), and FMSI environments.</p> <p>Right after the attack, a Kronos customer impacted in the incident told BleepingComputer that they had to go back to using paper and pencil to cut checks and monitor timekeeping.</p> <p>Thousands affected, almost half of all Puma employees</p>

"Since the attack was discovered, Kronos has been conducting a comprehensive review of the impacted environment to determine whether any individual's personal information was subject to unauthorized access or acquisition," written letters sent to impacted individuals on February 3 [say](#).

"On January 7, 2022, Kronos confirmed that some of your personal information was among the stolen data. We notified PUMA of this incident on January 10, 2022."

While the breach notification doesn't mention how many Puma employees had their info stolen during the attack, information provided to the Office of the Maine Attorney General [reveals](#) that the ransomware operators got their hands on data belonging to 6,632 individuals.

Puma also said that the documents stolen during the Kronos ransomware attack include Social Security Numbers in filings with the same office.

People affected by this data breach were also offered two years of free Experian IdentityWorks membership, which comes with credit monitoring, identify restoration, and identity theft insurance.

Puma is one of the world's leading sports brands with 14,300 employees worldwide and €5.23 billion in sales during 2020.

Hackers also stole source code for an internal Puma application in August and put it up for sale on the Marketo data leak portal. The attack [was confirmed](#) by the head of Puma's corporate communications, Robert-Jan Bartunek.

Update February 08, 04:41 EST: Puma's Senior Head of Communications Kerstin Neuber said that no Puma customer data was impacted in a follow-up statement sent after we published:

On January 10, 2022, PUMA North America was notified that UKG/ Kronos, one of PUMA's vendors, was mitigating the impact of a ransomware incident. The breach occurred solely within UKG/ Kronos' systems. No systems on PUMA's network were breached and no PUMA customer data was impacted. The incident was limited to Kronos' Private Cloud.

UKG/ Kronos has engaged cybersecurity experts, notified the authorities, and is communicating with those impacted. Any media inquiries related to the underlying UKG/Kronos breach should be directed to UKG as the matter is currently under investigation.

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HEADLINE	02/08 Qbot: 30min. to steal credentials, emails
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/qbot-needs-only-30-minutes-to-steal-your-credentials-emails/
GIST	<p>The widespread malware known as Qbot (aka Qakbot or QuakBot) has recently returned to light-speed attacks, and according to analysts, it only takes around 30 minutes to steal sensitive data after the initial infection.</p> <p>According to a new report by DFIR, Qbot was performing these quick data-snatching strikes back in October 2021, and it now appears that the threat actors behind it have returned to similar tactics.</p> <p>More specifically, the analysts report that it takes half an hour for the adversaries to steal browser data and emails from Outlook and 50 minutes before they jump to an adjacent workstation.</p> <p>The timeline of an attack</p> <p>The initial access is typically achieved via an Excel (XLS) document that uses a macro to drop the DLL loader on the target machine.</p>

This payload then executes to create a scheduled task via the msra.exe process and elevates itself to system privileges.

Additionally, the malware adds the Qbot DLL to Microsoft Defender's exclusion list, so it won't be detected when injection into msra.exe happens.

The malware steals emails in half an hour after the initial execution, which are then used for [replay-chain phishing attacks](#) and to be sold to other threat actors.

Qbot steals Windows credentials from memory using the LSASS (Local Security Authority Server Service) injections and from web browsers. These are leveraged for lateral movement to other devices on the network, initiated at an average of fifty minutes after first execution.

Network tiptoeing

Qbot moves laterally to all workstations in the scanned environment by copying a DLL to the next target and remotely creating a service to execute it.

At the same time, the previous infection is cleared, so the machine that just had its credentials exfiltrated is disinfected and appears normal.

Moreover, the services created on the new workstations have the 'DeleteFlag' parameter, which causes them to be removed upon system reboot.

The lateral movement takes place rapidly, so if there's no network segmentation to protect the workstations, the situation becomes very challenging for defense teams.

Also, the Qbot threat actors often like to use some of the compromised systems as first-tier proxy points for easy address masking and rotation, and use multiple ports for SSL communication with the C2 server.

The impact of [these expeditious attacks](#) isn't limited to data loss, as Qbot has also been observed to drop ransomware payloads onto compromised corporate networks.

A Microsoft report from December 2021 captured the [versatility of Qbot attacks](#), making it harder to evaluate the scope of its infections accurately.

However, no matter how a Qbot infection unfolds precisely, it is essential to keep in mind that almost all begin with an email, so this is the main access point that organizations need to strengthen.

Today's announcement by Microsoft that they will be [blocking macros in downloaded documents by default](#) by removing the 'Enable Content' and 'Enable Editing' buttons will go a long way to protecting users from Qbot phishing attacks.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Russia arrests third hacking group
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/russia-arrests-third-hacking-group-reportedly-seizes-carding-forums/
GIST	<p>Russia arrested six people today, allegedly part of a hacking group involved in the theft and selling of stolen credit cards.</p> <p>Russian media reports that the arrests come at the request of investigators from the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation.</p> <p>"The Tverskoy Court of Moscow received petitions from the investigation to select a measure of restraint in the form of detention against six people suspected of committing a crime under part 2 of article 187 of</p>

the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation ("Illegal circulation of means of payment")," said press court clerk Ksenia Rozina in a statement to [TASS Russian News Agency](#).

Article 187 of the "[The Criminal Code Of The Russian Federation](#)" relates to "The making of counterfeit credit or debit cards, and also of other payment documents, which are not securities, with the purpose of their utterance or their sale".

Russian law enforcement has not specified what hacking groups the arrested individuals were allegedly affiliated with.

However, in possibly related news, three carding forums/marketplaces devoted to the theft and selling of stolen credit cards suddenly displayed seizure notices today claiming to be from the Russian government.

BleepingComputer has confirmed that the websites for SkyFraud, Ferum, and Trump's Dumps now show notices saying the sites were seized by Management "K" of the BSTM of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia.

The seizure message translated by Google Translate reads in English as:

THIS RESOURCE IS BLOCKED

The SKYFRAUD resource was closed forever during a special law enforcement operation.

Management "K" of the BSTM of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia warns: theft of funds from bank cards is illegal!

Art. 187 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation: Production, acquisition, storage, transportation for the purpose of use or sale, as well as the sale of counterfeit payment cards, money transfer orders, documents or means of payment, as well as electronic means, electronic media, technical devices, computer programs, intended for illegal acceptance, issuance, transfer of funds.

Punishable by imprisonment for up to seven years.

While these seizure notices cite the same Russian Criminal Code offense as today's arrests of the six individuals, it has not been confirmed if the notices are legitimate or even related.

Security researcher [Soufiane Tahiri](#) also discovered that the source code for the sky-fraud.ru seizure notice includes a hidden message for other Russian hackers, saying "КТО ИЗ ВАС СЛЕДУЮЩИЙ?"

Translated into English, this warning says, "WHICH OF YOU IS NEXT?"

These arrests mark the third hacking group arrested by Russian authorities since the beginning of 2022.

In January, Russia seized \$6 million and [arrested fourteen individuals associated with REvil](#), a notorious ransomware operation responsible for numerous cyberattacks worldwide.

At the end of the month, [Russia also arrested the leader of the Infraud Organization](#), a hacking group that caused more than \$560 million in losses to businesses worldwide.

This stream of arrests by Russia is unusual as the country does not have a history of cooperating in the crackdown on cybercrime operating within its borders.

However, after [DarkSide's ransomware attack on Colonial Pipeline](#) and [REvil's attack on Kaseya](#), the White House and Russian representatives have been [working to increase cooperation](#) to stem the rising tide of hacking activities originating from Russia.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Roaming Mantis sets sights on Europe
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/roaming-mantis-android-malware-campaign-sets-sights-on-europe/?&web_view=true

The Roaming Mantis SMS phishing campaign has finally reached Europe, as researchers detect campaigns targeting Android and iPhone users in Germany and France with malicious apps and phishing pages.

Roaming Mantis is a credential theft and malware distribution campaign that uses SMS phishing (smishing) to distribute malicious Android apps as standalone APK files outside the Google Play Store.

Over the past four years, the campaign has been under constant evolution and was first spotted in 2018, targeting Android smartphone users in Japan via DNS hacking.

It later evolved to [target iOS users](#) with phishing pages for credential theft and expand the targeted countries to include Taiwan and Korea.

Fake shipping texts

In its most recent form, Roaming Mantis uses a trojan named '[Wroba](#),' and is targeting users in France and Germany with smishing messages and landing pages injected on compromised legitimate websites.

The goal of Wroba is to steal e-banking details, and [like other similar trojans](#), it spreads automatically using SMS phishing texts to people in the infected device's contacts.

The infection chain starts with the arrival of an SMS text on the target device, which contains a short warning message about a shipped package with an included URL.

If the URL is clicked from an Apple device, it redirects the victim to a phishing page, where it attempts to steal the user's Apple login credentials.

However, if the victim uses an Android device, they are taken to a landing page that prompts them to install malware disguised as an Android app.

The impersonated apps that contain the Wroba are predominantly for Google Chrome but also imitate the Yamato transport and ePOST apps.

Now stealing your images and videos

Compared to past variants, the Wroba loader and payload have evolved and are now written in Kotlin, a language with excellent interoperability with Java.

The backdoor includes 21 malicious commands that can be executed by the attacks, with two new ones added in recent campaigns. These new commands are "get_gallery" and "get_photo," which are meant to steal the victim's photos and videos and upload them to the attacker's servers.

[Kaspersky explains](#) that threat actors may use the addition of these two new commands for financial fraud, identity theft, blackmail, and extortion if sensitive media is stolen.

"One possible scenario is that the criminals steal details from such things as driver's licenses, health insurance cards or bank cards, to sign up for contracts with QR code payment services or mobile payment services," Kaspersky explains in [their report](#).

"The criminals are also able to use stolen photos to get money in other ways, such as blackmail or sextortion."

Don't get bit by the Mantis

To prevent Roaming Mantis and other Android malware from infecting your device, you should always avoid downloading APKs from unusual sources and never allow the installation of packages from unknown sources.

Furthermore, SMS texts that contain URLs should always be treated with caution and suspicion, even if they come from someone you know.

	Finally, an Android internet security tool from a trustworthy vendor could help flag these URLs upon visiting them, as analysts actively track these campaigns.
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HEADLINE	02/07 New CapraRAT malware targets India
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/new-caprarat-android-malware-targets.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>A politically motivated advanced persistent threat (APT) group has expanded its malware arsenal to include a new remote access trojan (RAT) in its espionage attacks aimed at Indian military and diplomatic entities.</p> <p>Called CapraRAT by Trend Micro, the implant is an Android RAT that exhibits a high "degree of crossover" with another Windows malware known as CrimsonRAT that's associated with Earth Karkaddan, a threat actor that's also tracked under the monikers APT36, Operation C-Major, PROJECTM, Mythic Leopard, and Transparent Tribe.</p> <p>The first concrete signs of APT36's existence appeared in 2016 as the group began distributing information-stealing malware through phishing emails with malicious PDF attachments targeting Indian military and government personnel. The group is believed to be of Pakistani origin and operational since at least 2013.</p> <p>The threat actor is also known to be consistent in its modus operandi, with the attacks predominantly banking on social engineering and a USB-based worm as entry points. Among common elements in the group's arsenal is a Windows backdoor called CrimsonRAT that allows the attackers extensive access to compromised systems, although recent campaigns have evolved to deliver ObliqueRAT.</p> <p>CrimsonRAT is fashioned as a .NET binary whose main purpose is to obtain and exfiltrate information from targeted Windows systems, including screenshots, keystrokes, and files from removable drives, and upload them to the attacker's command-and-control server.</p> <p>The new addition to its toolset is yet another custom Android RAT that's deployed by means of phishing links. CapraRAT, which is disguised as a YouTube app, is said to be a modified version of an open-source RAT called AndroRAT and comes with a variety of data exfiltration functions, including the ability to harvest victims' locations, phone logs, and contact information.</p> <p>This is far from the first time the hacking group has used Android RATs. In May 2018, human rights defenders in Pakistan were targeted by Android spyware named StealthAgent to intercept phone calls and messages, siphon photos, and track their whereabouts.</p> <p>Then in 2020, attack campaigns mounted by Transparent Tribe involved leveraging military-themed lures to drop a modified version of the AhMyth Android RAT that masqueraded as a porn-related app and a fake version of the Aarogya Setu COVID-19 tracking app.</p> <p>To mitigate such attacks, users are advised to watch out for unsolicited emails, avoid clicking on links or downloading email attachments from unknown senders, install apps only from trusted sources, and exercise caution when it comes to granting permissions requested by the apps.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DPD Group parcel tracking flaw
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/dpd-group-parcel-tracking-flaw-may-have-exposed-customer-data/?&web_view=true
GIST	An unauthenticated API call vulnerability in DPD Group's package tracking system could have been exploited to access the personally identifiable details of its clients.

DPD Group is a parcel delivery service with a global presence, shipping around two billion parcels annually worldwide.

To track the status and position of their parcel, customers are expected to enter a parcel code and postcode, and if they match a valid entry in the database, they are authorized to view the shipping details.

Accessing recipient's details

Researchers at [Pen Test Partners](#) explored the system and found that they could try out parcel codes on API calls and get back OpenStreetMap addresses with the recipient's position on the map.

Although the call returned just a screenshot of the map, it is fairly easy to derive the postcode in most cases by using the street names depicted on the picture.

Holding a valid parcel code and a matching postcode, an unauthorized individual could access someone else's tracking page displaying delivery information.

With the valid session token granted, one can view the underlying JSON data, including that person's full name, email address, mobile phone number, and more.

Remediation and impact

Pen Test Partners discovered the problem on September 02, 2021, and alerted DPD immediately. The firm evaluated the issue for a month and eventually pushed a fix on October 2021.

As such, the API access vulnerability remained available for exploitation for at least a month, but the window of opportunity was probably much more extensive.

Although the researchers likely were the first to discover this, the scenario of "silent" long-term abuse cannot be excluded.

The way this API attack worked is random, as one cannot guess parcel numbers for given identities, but it would still be useful in the hands of phishing actors.

Knowing the shipping status details and the matching contact details sets the stage for a successful phishing attack.

Parcel delivery service providers were the [most imitated type of companies](#) by phishing campaigns at the end of 2021, so this is already a highly-targeted sector.

We have reached out to DPD Group to request more information on the API flaw and its potential impact on customers, but we have not heard back from the firm yet.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Insidious Mac malware more sophisticated
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/mac-malware-growing-more-sophisticated/
GIST	<p>MAC MALWARE KNOWN as UpdateAgent has been spreading for more than a year, and it is growing increasingly malevolent as its developers add new bells and whistles. The additions include the pushing of an aggressive second-stage adware payload that installs a persistent backdoor on infected Macs.</p> <p>The UpdateAgent malware family began circulating no later than November or December 2020 as a relatively basic information-stealer. It collected product names, version numbers, and other basic system information. Its methods of persistence—that is, the ability to run each time a Mac boots—were also fairly rudimentary.</p> <p>Person-in-the-Middle attack</p>

Over time, [Microsoft said](#) on Wednesday, UpdateAgent has grown increasingly advanced. Besides the data sent to the attacker server, the app also sends “heartbeats” that let attackers know if the [malware](#) is still running. It also installs adware known as Adload.

Microsoft researchers wrote:

Once adware is installed, it uses ad injection software and techniques to intercept a device’s online communications and redirect users’ traffic through the adware operators’ servers, injecting advertisements and promotions into webpages and search results. More specifically, Adload leverages a Person-in-The-Middle (PiTM) attack by installing a web proxy to hijack search engine results and inject advertisements into webpages, thereby siphoning ad revenue from official website holders to the adware operators.

Adload is also an unusually persistent strain of adware. It is capable of opening a backdoor to download and install other adware and payloads in addition to harvesting system information that is sent to the attackers’ C2 servers. Considering both UpdateAgent and Adload have the ability to install additional payloads, attackers can leverage either or both of these vectors to potentially deliver more dangerous threats to target systems in future campaigns.

Before installing the adware, UpdateAgent now removes a flag that a [macOS](#) security mechanism called [Gatekeeper](#) adds to downloaded files. (Gatekeeper ensures users receive a warning that new software comes from the internet, and it also ensures the software doesn’t match known malware strains.) While this malicious capability isn’t novel—[Mac malware from 2017](#) did the same thing—its incorporation into UpdateAgent indicates the malware is under regular development.

UpdateAgent’s reconnaissance has been expanded to collect [system profile](#) and [SPHardwaretype](#) data, which, among other things, reveals a Mac’s serial number. The malware also started modifying the LaunchDaemon folder instead of the LaunchAgent folder as before. While the change requires UpdateAgent to run as administrator, the change allows the trojan to inject persistent code that runs as root.

Once installed, the malware collects the system info and sends it to the attackers’ control server and takes a host of other actions.

Microsoft said UpdateAgent masquerades as legitimate software, such as video apps or support agents, that is spread through pop-ups or ads on hacked or malicious websites. Microsoft didn’t explicitly say so, but users apparently must be tricked into installing UpdateAgent, and during that process, Gatekeeper works as designed.

In many ways, the evolution of UpdateAgent is a microcosm for the macOS malware landscape as a whole: Malware continues to become more advanced. Mac users should learn how to spot social engineering lures, such as unsolicited popups appearing in browser windows that warn of infections or unpatched software.

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HEADLINE	02/07 How badly China wants to hack the US
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/07/news-corp-breach-illustrates-how-badly-china-wants-hack-us/
GIST	<p>A hack on journalists shows the breadth of China's espionage efforts</p> <p>A multiyear email breach at News Corp. publications shows the massive scope of Chinese hackers’ intelligence gathering.</p> <p>The hackers, who are likely tied to the Chinese government, gained access to emails and documents from reporters and others at publications including the Wall Street Journal, the New York Post and News UK, Aaron Gregg and Eva Dou report. They were rooting around in those systems since at least February, 2020, the Journal’s Alexandra Bruell, Sadie Gurman and Dustin Volz report.</p>

The breaches reflect Beijing’s insatiable desire for hacked documents that could benefit Chinese interests, which has led to the compromise of hundreds of institutions ranging from [government agencies](#) to [Big Tech companies](#), [media organizations](#), [think tanks](#) and [critical industries](#).

“There is just no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, our innovation, and our economic security than China,” FBI Director **Christopher Wray** said in a [speech](#) last week, in which he described over 2,000 FBI investigations focused on Chinese theft of U.S. data.

The News Corps. hackers accessed documents that would be of high interest to Chinese officials including those related to stories about Taiwan, China’s Uyghur Muslim minority which the White House has said are the focus of Beijing-backed human rights abuse, and Biden administration efforts to ramp up protections against Chinese technology, Dustin noted on Twitter.

The hacks affected “scores of reporters,” some of whom had documents compromised related to 20 or more news stories, he said.

The Journal has notified reporters about specific stories that were compromised, the paper said. The investigation so far suggests subscriber information wasn’t breached.

There’s no definitive evidence China was behind the breach, but there’s a clear “China nexus,” said David Wong, vice president of the cyber firm Mandiant, which is helping News Corp. respond to and remediate the breach. He described the hackers as “likely involved in espionage activities to collect intelligence to benefit China’s interests.”

Despite the huge breadth of Chinese cyber activity, the nation has typically shrugged off claims about specific hacks — often arguing it’s too difficult to prove anyone’s responsible for anything in the shadowy world of cyberspace. U.S. officials dispute that claim and some [industry reports](#) have provided highly detailed evidence of Chinese hacking operations.

In this case, Chinese embassy spokesman Liu Pengyu denied Chinese involvement, saying China “firmly opposes and combats cyberattacks and cyber theft in all forms.”

“We hope that there can be a professional, responsible and evidence-based approach to identifying cyber-related incidents, rather than making allegations based on speculations,” he said.

The good news: The hack appears to be limited to emails and Google docs including some reporters’ article drafts. That means the hackers likely didn’t access the most sensitive conversations with sources, which security experts urge reporters to conduct using encrypted messaging apps.

However: Sensitive information can certainly creep into reporters’ emails, either because of accidents or carelessness or because analysts can deduce such information by putting together otherwise innocuous clues.

“You can draw some pretty good inferences from a pattern of email behavior,” a Journal staffer [told](#) CNN’s Oliver Darcy when describing a sense of alarm among staffers at the newspaper.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	02/07 NCTC: new app tracks terror-linked events
SOURCE	https://www.nextgov.com/it-modernization/2022/02/new-app-tracks-terrorism-linked-events-local-us-communities/361683/

The National Counterterrorism Center or NCTC designed and launched a new mobile app and website that provide unclassified intelligence reports, training materials and breaking alert notifications tracking terrorist-associated events.

Dubbed “aCTknowledge,” this new digital tool was produced with—and explicitly for—U.S. law enforcement officers, first responders and homeland security professionals. It will be frequently updated based on their feedback going forward.

“This is a tremendous evolution of our information-sharing effort,” an NCTC expert who helped build the platform told reporters during a press briefing on Monday.

That official was among several who shared details about aCTknowledge on the call.

As a component of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, NCTC connects specialists from different government hubs for counterterrorism aims, captures and analyzes intelligence, monitors national and international communications for threats, manages massive lists of incidents and individuals with potential links to terrorism, and more. The center was formed at the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission.

“After [Sept. 11, 2001], it was obviously determined that we do need to be sharing info and part of the reason the [NCTC] was formed was to have a place where that info could reside and that we can push it out and have the relationship with the community,” another expert explained during the briefing. “So on our end, we do want to share when we can the information that's needed to protect communities.”

The [new aCTknowledge resource](#) is meant to be a one-stop-shop for NCTC analyses, training materials and real-time alerts, among other assets. Users can search for specific topics of interest, which will also inform new features it could include down the line.

In this first release, the tool is available to the center’s federal and military partners—but officials confirmed that “in the coming months” it will be rolled out to state, tribal, local and other players that NCTC works with. As a mobile application, aCTknowledge is now currently listed in the Apple App Store, and it will soon be offered in Google Play for use on Android devices. Besides the mobile option, it is also offered as a web portal to fit the needs of different types of users and first responders who function in different environments.

Officials are required to register with their official government email address after downloading the application, and vetting information must also be submitted.

“The information that the app will have is unclassified, for official use only,” an expert said on the call. “So, it's for people who need to use that information to keep their community safe.”

Previously, the center would disperse a great deal of its information to its stakeholders via email and on listserves. Officials believe offering alerts and incident updates that can be accessed on handheld devices in real-time will help boost response and protection.

“Our ability to send push notifications to partners using the app is really going to change the community in general, because we'll be able to immediately level-set everyone's understanding of counterterrorism event as it occurs,” one said.

To help visualize its potential impact, another individual mentioned the recent [hostage situation](#) that starkly unfolded at a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, where an hours-long standoff ensued.

“Once we do the later rollout to first responders, [and] state and local [partners], one thing that'll be neat about the app is when you have an incident like, say—there was the Colleyville incident a few weeks ago—if you're law enforcement in another part of the country, you can be tracking that in real-time and

	<p>thinking ‘okay, well, do I need to be looking at synagogues as well, or something like that,’ to really make use of the information in a practical way,” they explained.</p> <p>NCTC officials repeatedly emphasized that they worked with and were informed by teams from the New Jersey State Police, the Jackson Fire and Rescue Service and the Las Vegas Metro Police Department—and multiple others—in developing and refining aCTknowledge.</p> <p>The platform will also continue to be expanded and updated with new features based on user input now that it is in use, the experts noted. Audio and video capabilities aren’t yet offered in the tool, for example, but they’ll likely be included in the future.</p> <p>“We aren’t just endlessly building,” an official said. “We’re building with purpose.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 IS militants pursued after prison break
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-militants-pursued-after-syria-prison-break-11644257825
GIST	<p>HASAKAH, Syria—Days after the death of Islamic State’s leader, U.S.-backed Kurdish-led militias are hunting down fugitives involved in a northeast Syria prison break that the terrorist group launched last month to replenish its dwindling ranks.</p> <p>Islamic State gunmen have appeared in the city of Hasakah more than two weeks after the prison break, showing how the Jan. 20 attack could have a lasting impact on the group’s ability to regenerate and terrorize the surrounding community. The assault on the prison was Islamic State’s worst attack in Syria in at least three years, resulting in a weeklong siege and gunbattles that left nearly 500 people dead.</p> <p>The prison break was among the last acts directed by Islamic State’s leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who detonated explosives that killed him and his family during a U.S. Special Forces raid in northwestern Syria last Thursday.</p> <p>Qurayshi was concerned about a lack of fighting manpower in recent months, said intelligence officials with the U.S., Iraq and a European country. The United Nations estimates ISIS retains at least 6,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria, where it is forming cells and training operatives to launch attacks.</p> <p>But with most of Islamic State’s fighters in prison or in hiding, much of its force was made up of women who had escaped from Syria’s displacement camps for families, the officials said.</p> <p>Umm Hussein, 54 years old, who lives near the prison, said she fled during the fighting and returned home Friday to change the locks before moving back. After hearing a noise inside, she swung open a door to find two men in the loosefitting, black and brown clothes of Islamic State, running from her kitchen to the living room.</p> <p>She ran outside and called for help. Neighbors crowded outside the house as security forces arrived, grabbed the two men and drove them away in trucks.</p> <p>For Umm Hussein, it was a surreal repeat of the first night of the prison break, when Islamic State members, including one still wearing an orange prison jumpsuit, barged into her house looking for a change of clothes before they fled into the night.</p> <p>“I’m afraid. I’m worried. That’s all I feel,” she said.</p> <p>The ongoing hunt for escaped prisoners shows how the prison break may have succeeded to a degree beyond that acknowledged by American officials and their local partners. The Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-dominated militia that controls northeastern Syria with U.S. backing, has yet to disclose how many prisoners remain on the run.</p>

The SDF said it killed 374 Islamic State members and recaptured at least 1,100 prisoners. Between 3,500 and 5,000 prisoners were held before the attack.

As the manhunt continues, the SDF has imposed a 6 p.m. curfew and deployed additional security forces, with extra trucks and gunmen in balaclavas posted in public squares as far away as Raqqa, 115 miles west of Hasakah.

Islamic State has used prison breaks to bolster its ranks ever since the group grew out of the insurgency against the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq after 2003.

The attack in Syria last month triggered alarms in Iraq, where officials worried the Syria prison break could lead to a repeat of the mass breakout of jihadists at Abu Ghraib prison in July 2013, which became a pivotal moment in Islamic State's rapid expansion the following year, an Iraqi official said.

Using informants on the ground, Iraqi intelligence intensified its efforts to track Qurayshi's location in Idlib and passed their findings to counterterrorism officials in the U.S., said Iraqi and Western officials.

Western security officials say Islamic State's next leader is likely to be from Iraq, the organization's birthplace and the country where its cash reserves are hidden. Qurayshi and his predecessors were also Iraqi.

The Syria prison break itself was a powerful statement of Islamic State's enduring abilities. Three suicide car bombs slammed into the prison. Inmates besieged their guards, beheading some of them, said Malak Maesh, 26, a guard who survived.

Prisoners poured into the surrounding area, confirming something Hasakah residents had long feared, that Islamic State members and informants had been hiding among them for months or even years.

Two families said Islamic State members, using help from local informants, were searching the city for local security forces and executing them, some by beheading.

On the night of Jan. 20, about 20 Islamic State men appeared at the door of Abdel Qader Azayzi, a 29-year-old mechanic living near the prison. With them was a man wearing a mask, guiding the militants as they hunted for security officers. The man knew him, Mr. Azayzi said.

"Leave them. These men work on cars," the masked man said, referring to Mr. Azayzi and his brother.

Unsatisfied, the gunmen pushed their way into the house and began searching the men's phones. On the phone of Mr. Azayzi's young cousin, Ghassan, they found an image of him in military uniform. The men hauled Ghassan outside and shot him dead.

"We can't sleep at night," said Mr. Azayzi.

The attack put a spotlight on the U.S. partnership with the SDF, which the U.S. has backed in the fight against Islamic State since 2014.

"It shows limits of the SDF, including its intelligence gathering about communities where ISIS still operates and friction between local Arab communities and SDF leadership," said Robert Ford, a former U.S. ambassador to Syria.

"Without reform of the SDF, ISIS will find a few recruits every week," he said.

The SDF has rejected the assertion that it is to blame for Islamic State recruitment, and has argued that the world has given it the unfair burden of guarding [thousands of members, affiliates, and their family members](#). Prisoners in the Hasakah prison had at least 20 different nationalities, officials say. Countries across the world have generally refused to accept the return of their citizens held in the facility.

HEADLINE	02/07 US reward: info on ISIS-K leader, attackers
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-offers-reward-information-isis-k-leader-kabul-airport-attack-2022-02-07/
GIST	<p>Feb 7 (Reuters) - The United States said on Monday it was offering a reward of up to \$10 million each for information leading to the identification or location of ISIS-K leader Sanaullah Ghafari and for information leading to the arrest of those responsible for a deadly August 2021 attack at Kabul airport.</p> <p>The Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, is the regional Islamic State affiliate, which first appeared in 2014 and is named after an old term for the region. It has previously fought both the Western-backed government that fell in August and the Taliban.</p> <p>In June 2020, Ghafari was appointed by the extremist group to lead ISIS-K. Ghafari was responsible for approving all ISIS-K operations throughout Afghanistan and arranging funding to conduct operations, the U.S. State Department said.</p> <p>In November, the State Department designated Ghafari as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist". The U.S. military said on Friday that a single Islamic State bomber killed 13 U.S. troops and at least 170 Afghans at Kabul airport last August.</p> <p>The bombing occurred on Aug. 26 as U.S. troops were trying to help both Americans and Afghans flee in the chaotic aftermath of the Taliban's takeover, and compounded America's sense of defeat after 20 years of war.</p> <p>It also left President Joe Biden's administration struggling to answer accusations that the State Department could have evacuated Americans sooner instead of putting U.S. troops at risk.</p> <p>U.S. officials said in November they believed ISIS-K could develop the ability to strike outside of Afghanistan within six to 12 months.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DHS: terror threat after HBCU bomb threats
SOURCE	https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2022/02/07/dhs-warns-terrorism-threat/6671644263545/
GIST	<p>Feb. 7 (UPI) -- The Department of Homeland Security warned of a heightened threat of domestic and foreign terrorism in the United States in a bulletin issued Monday.</p> <p>The threat of terrorism will remain at a heightened level until the bulletin expires in June after recent bomb threats made to at least six historically Black colleges and universities and the hostage incident at a synagogue in Texas.</p> <p>The National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin warns that online conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information have motivated terrorists to "exacerbate societal friction to sow discord and undermine public trust in the government."</p> <p>"The recent attack on a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, highlights the continuing threat of violence based upon racial or religious motivations, as well as threats against faith-based organizations," the bulletin reads.</p> <p>"Threats directed at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other colleges and universities, Jewish facilities, and churches cause concern and may inspire extremist threat actors to mobilize to violence."</p> <p>Homeland Security officials warned that mass-casualty attacks and other acts of targeted violence continue to be conducted by lone offenders and small groups posing an ongoing threat to the nation.</p>

"The convergence of violent extremist ideologies, false or misleading narratives, and conspiracy theories have and will continue to contribute to a heightened threat of violence in the United States," the bulletin reads.

The DHS noted its Office of Intelligence and Analysis established a new branch in May 2021 dedicated to providing intelligence on domestic terrorism threats.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in a statement that the department "remains committed to proactively sharing timely information and intelligence about the evolving threat environment with the American public.

"We also remain committed to working with our partners across every level of government and in the private sector to prevent all forms of terrorism and targeted violence, and to support law enforcement efforts to keep our communities safe," he said.

At least six HBCUs received elaborate bomb threats made by telephone calls last week prompting heavy police responses and lockdowns at Albany State University, Bethune-Cookman University, Bowie State University, Delaware State University, Howard University and Southern University and A&M.

No suspect has been arrested but federal agencies including the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives have announced investigations into the bomb threats.

Last month, a British man Malik Faisal Akram took four people hostage at Congregation Beth Israel in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex while claiming to have explosives during an 11-hour standoff with law enforcement.

A former Kansas teacher has also been denied bail after she was arrested on federal charges for allegedly providing material support to ISIS.

Allison Fluke-Ekren, 42, is accused of having been involved with terrorism-related activities on behalf of ISIS since at least 2014 -- including plotting a potential attack on a college campus in the United States.

One witness told the FBI that Fluke-Ekren had also plotted an attack on a shopping mall in the United States, in which terrorists would park a vehicle filled with explosives in its parking garage and detonate them with a cell phone trigger device.

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HEADLINE	02/07 ISIS-K inaugural magazine criticizes Taliban
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/inaugural-magazine-from-isis-khorasan-declares-taliban-can-become-our-brother/
GIST	<p>The Islamic State in Afghanistan and the surrounding region released its first English-language magazine online, declaring that theirs is the “most important province” of ISIS after Iraq and Syria.</p> <p>Much of the 37-page Voice of Khurasan inaugural issue, released by Islamic State Wilayah Khorasan’s Al-Azaim Media Foundation, is dedicated to criticizing the Taliban, calling them the “apostate slave organization of the ISI” in Pakistan while laying out conditions under which they could be allies, and trying to lure both local and foreign fighters to join ISIS.</p> <p>The magazine, which praised the recent ISIS attack on Ghweran prison in Syria and told other ISIS prisoners “we shall come for you,” was released shortly before ISIS core leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi was killed during a U.S. raid last week on his Syria hideout and reverently references his predecessor, late ISIS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.</p>

While vowing that “the fighting has just begun” in theirs and other territories that ISIS claims as provinces, the magazine said it was launching a series of profiles of jihadists in order to “incite our believers.”

The first profile focuses on Abdul Rahman al-Logari, who killed 13 U.S. service members and 170 Afghan civilians when he detonated a suicide bomb on Aug. 26 within the crowds rushing to flee the country gathered outside Hamid Karzai International Airport. ISIS said he was born in Pakistan in 1996 to a wealthy Afghan family, was fluent in English and went to college in Islamabad where “he had chosen journalism as a career path.” The group said he fell in with the newly formed ISKP chapter in 2016 after moving to Afghanistan, and was active in recruiting foreign fighters to ISIS’ former caliphate in Iraq and Syria via social media operations. He also trained in bomb-making, and was previously supposed to be a suicide bomber “a few times” but those operations were canceled “due to various reasons.”

The magazine states that al-Logari enrolled at a university in New Delhi in 2017 as “cover up for his mission” to conduct an attack in India but was arrested a week before the planned date. He was sent back to Afghanistan and sentenced to five years behind bars, and ISIS Khorasan praised him for resisting “extreme pressure” from his family to deradicalize. He was housed with other ISIS members in prison and contracted tuberculosis while incarcerated, ISIS said, and was moved to Bagram “on the request of the CIA” to be interrogated about ISIS attacks in Kabul. He was broken out of prison on Aug. 15, 2021, and “directly requested to be given a mission” to conduct a suicide attack, the magazine said, and detonated his bomb outside Kabul International Airport when a U.S. service member was about to check him for explosives.

The magazine furthers the long-running ISIS narrative that the loss of the group’s claimed caliphate in Iraq and Syria is “temporary,” adding that “although we lost the Khilafah territory and thousands of Mujahideen were martyred in a period of 5 years, there is no problem.”

“In the present situation, we consider ourselves stronger and more active than before,” the terror group states. “... We are engaged in our preparations and we are going to take our account from the infidels and apostates especially the polytheistic, grave-worshipping apostate Taliban.”

However, ISIS tells the Taliban in the article that they will “become our brother” if they “desist from your deeds, declare yourself free from infidel democratic system, free your necks from slavery of infidels and ISI, repent from infidel beliefs, innovations and other superstitions,” release prisoners and “acknowledge the sovereignty of one God alone.”

“We will live and die together; we will give priority to you in every matter,” ISIS Khorasan said. “If you do not desist and do not obey us, then know that the time of oppression is fixed... then neither the aid of America nor the patronage of ISI will do you any good.”

The magazine continued to declare that “even though our territories have been taken away from us” ISIS is still “engaged” in jihad as “we are East Africa, West Africa, Central Africa, Libya, Sinai and other countries including the Philippines are moving very fast and our numbers and strength are increasing day by day.”

It then encouraged all Muslims in Afghanistan to “play our role” in establishing the ISIS caliphate in the region, “declaring freedom from all false systems and their followers and free from all kinds of national, patriotic, linguistic, regional and organizational prejudices” to “bring this spring of Khilafah back to Khorasan.”

This call was directly followed by an article simply titled “charity,” “extracted” from the first volume of ISIS’ now-defunct Rumiyah magazine, beseeching others to do “jihad using one’s wealth” because cash is “used initially in order to prepare equipment and arm the troops” and not everyone — including women — is called upon to physically fight.

	<p>“It is known that women — other than those whom Allah protects, and they are very few — often engage in nonsense, showing ingratitude towards their husbands, backbiting, and other grave sins,” the ISIS chapter claims, saying they “could atone for some of what they have committed in this worldly life” through charity — and “how, than, about the charity given to help prepare the mujahidin for Allah’s cause?”</p> <p>The article continues to slam women as “spending extravagantly on transient worldly things of clothing, jewelry, feasts, and so forth” while being “miserly and stingy when it comes to the religion of Allah,” claiming there is an obligation to financially support jihadists “though the Muslim women may miss out on much goodness in waging jihad with the sword.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DHS issues NTAS bulletin
SOURCE	https://www.dhs.gov/news/2022/02/07/dhs-issues-national-terrorism-advisory-system-ntas-bulletin
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON – Today, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas issued a National Terrorism Advisory System (NTAS) Bulletin regarding the continued heightened threat environment across the United States. This is the fifth NTAS Bulletin issued by the Department of Homeland Security since January 2021 and it replaces the current Bulletin that was set to expire tomorrow.</p> <p>“DHS remains committed to proactively sharing timely information and intelligence about the evolving threat environment with the American public,” said Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas. “We also remain committed to working with our partners across every level of government and in the private sector to prevent all forms of terrorism and targeted violence, and to support law enforcement efforts to keep our communities safe. This NTAS Bulletin outlines the key factors that have increased the volatility, unpredictability, and complexity of the current threat environment, and highlights resources for individuals and communities to stay safe.”</p> <p>The United States remains in a heightened threat environment fueled by several factors, including an online environment filled with false or misleading narratives and conspiracy theories, and other forms of mis- dis- and mal-information (MDM) introduced and/or amplified by foreign and domestic threat actors. These threat actors seek to exacerbate societal friction to sow discord and undermine public trust in government institutions to encourage unrest, which could potentially inspire acts of violence. Mass casualty attacks and other acts of targeted violence conducted by lone offenders and small groups acting in furtherance of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances pose an ongoing threat to the nation. While the conditions underlying the heightened threat landscape have not significantly changed over the last year, the convergence of the following factors has increased the volatility, unpredictability, and complexity of the threat environment: (1) the proliferation of false or misleading narratives, which sow discord or undermine public trust in U.S. government institutions; (2) continued calls for violence directed at U.S. critical infrastructure; soft targets and mass gatherings; faith-based institutions, such as churches, synagogues, and mosques; institutions of higher education; racial and religious minorities; government facilities and personnel, including law enforcement and the military; the media; and perceived ideological opponents; and (3) calls by foreign terrorist organizations for attacks on the United States based on recent events.</p> <p>This NTAS Bulletin will expire on June 7, 2022. This NTAS Bulletin provides the public with information about the threat landscape facing the United States, how to stay safe, and resources and tools to help prevent an individual’s radicalization to violence. The public should report any suspicious activity or threats of violence to local law enforcement, FBI Field Offices, or a local Fusion Center. Read the current NTAS Bulletin here.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DHS warns: synagogue copycat attacks
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/dhs-copycat-attacks-hostage-standoff-texas-synagogue/

Washington — The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a terror threat bulletin Monday warning that supporters of foreign terrorist organizations have encouraged copycat attacks following [last month's hostage standoff crisis](#) at Beth Israel Synagogue in Colleyville, Texas.

"The recent attack on a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas highlights the continuing threat of violence based upon racial or religious motivations, as well as threats against faith-based organizations," the department cautioned in its latest [National Terrorism Advisory System \(NTAS\) bulletin](#).

The warning said that the "primary terrorism-related threat to the United States continues to stem from lone offenders or small cells of individuals" whose grievances are increasingly "cultivated through the consumption of certain online content."

"Prior to the events in Colleyville, we were seeing a significant level of activity by media operations associated with al Qaeda and ISIS where they were seeking to inspire followers to conduct lone offender attacks in the U.S.," a senior homeland security official told reporters during a briefing Monday. The official stressed that government analysts have observed a "greater level of specificity" in calls for targeted violence against faith-based institutions, government facilities and institutions of higher learning.

The official ticked off a list of possible threats: "Mass shootings, using vehicles, knife attacks."

Following the Texas hostage standoff, homeland security analysts observed content by ISIS- and al Qaeda-aligned commentators pointing to Colleyville as a shining example of the types of attacks that should be carried out within the U.S. in support of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani woman serving an 86-year sentence in a federal prison in Texas for trying to kill U.S. officers in Afghanistan. The Colleyville gunman repeatedly demanded her release.

Senior homeland security officials also observed "reflections on white supremacist platforms where they were complimentary of the targeting of [Beth Israel] synagogue, but they noted that the hostage taker didn't kill anybody," raising concerns of even more lethal violence in the future.

The bulletin also follows [a string of bomb threats](#) against historically Black colleges and universities at the start of Black History Month, prompting shelter-in-place orders and canceled classes as authorities swept campuses looking for devices.

Monday's terrorism advisory noted that "threats directed at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other colleges and universities, Jewish facilities, and churches cause concern and may inspire extremist threat actors to mobilize to violence."

Violent extremists inspired by a range of grievances and ideologies continue to target crowded venues traditionally perceived to be soft targets, such as commercial and publicly accessible facilities, public gatherings, certain government and state facilities, and houses of worship, the advisory warned.

As FBI and federal law enforcement continue to investigate approximately a half-dozen persons of interest suspected of making the threats to HBCUs, officials underscored the rising challenge of encrypted communications used to disguise the source of threats online.

"We're increasingly seeing the utilization of digital tools, technological tools, whether it's encrypted communications, or in this case, potentially the use of technical capabilities. It's a real challenge for law enforcement to stay ahead of those tools by threat actors," the senior homeland security official added.

Recent threats directed against HBCUs dated back to December, according to another official, noting that "bomb threats did affect other entities and institutions." DHS officials have not seen calls for "copycat attacks" following last week's bomb threats, but vowed to "remain vigilant" in providing information to all of the impacted targets.

Recent threats directed at both places of worship and universities have also underscored homeland security officials' calls for greater funding for a program that provides grants to nonprofits to help boost security.

"That program is referenced in this bulletin because it's so critical to ensuring that nonprofits including faith-based organizations have the access to funding that they can use, for example, to invest in physical security enhancements," the senior homeland security official told reporters Monday. "The synagogue in Colleyville, Texas that was unfortunately targeted, had in fact received one of these grants in a previous funding cycle."

In the days following the hostages' escape, leaders of the faith community have revisited calls to double funding for the security grant program from \$180 million to \$360 million. CBS News was the [first to report](#) on calls for greater funding by DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. The House Homeland Security Committee is slated to host a hearing on the program on Tuesday featuring [Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker](#), who was among the hostages held by the Texas gunman.

Although U.S. officials have witnessed an increased level of specificity in calls to violence, as of Monday, DHS is not aware of any imminent and credible threat to a specific place within the homeland.

The new bulletin expands on an [NTAS bulletin released in November](#) that was set to expire on Tuesday. And while the U.S. continues to face similar "conditions underlying the heightened threat landscape," according to the bulletin, the environment has become increasingly volatile, unpredictable and complex in recent weeks.

"There are certain factors that are causing us more concern," compared to three months ago, according to a senior homeland security official.

Yet officials stress that the federal law enforcement and intelligence communities are better equipped to deal with the threat compared to a year ago. "I don't want anybody to be depressed after I go through the threat," one official told reporters. "Because I think that while the threat is very serious, on the other hand, our efforts to deal with the threat are much improved."

Also on Monday, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) announced the launch of a new smartphone application for its federal and military partners that would serve as a "one-stop shop" for real-time, unclassified intelligence on potential terrorist activities.

"This is a tremendous evolution of our information-sharing efforts," one official who briefed reporters said. "[W]e'll be able to immediately level-set everyone's understanding of a counterterrorism event as it occurs, which will enable federal, state and local partners over time to have force posture considerations and advance knowledge" that they did not previously have.

NCTC, which was established after 9/11 and is part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, had been releasing information on a weekly basis and via DHS and FBI platforms, including classified information, since at least 2015. While the app itself will be publicly available, only eligible users will be able to access its full suite of functions; regular users will only see a limited version.

"The app empowers its users with the information they need to protect their communities from potential threats," NCTC Director Christy Abizaid said in a statement.

According to Monday's bulletin, foreign terrorists have also consistently expressed a desire to stage retaliatory attacks on Americans following [a counterterrorism raid](#) in northwest [Syria](#) last week that led to the death of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who U.S. officials say blew himself up as troops closed in.

NTAS bulletins are designed to illustrate current developments or trends about terrorism threats to the public. But Monday's advisory is not to be confused with an elevated alert, which informs law

	enforcement of a credible terrorism threat, or an imminent alert, which warns of a credible, specific and impending terrorism threat.
	Wednesday's NTAS bulletin remains in effect through June 7, 2022.
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/07 Sold: Bellevue home \$1M over list price
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/real-estate/bellevue-home-sells-for-nearly-1m-over-list-price/
GIST	<p>Real estate broker Max Rombakh expected the spacious four-bedroom house in a sought-after Bellevue neighborhood to sell at least a bit above its \$2.65 million list price. But even he wasn't prepared for the final outcome: nearly \$1 million more.</p> <p>Would-be buyers lined up outside and 14 made offers. "All above asking, and it closed to a cash buyer," said Rombakh, a Windermere broker based in Yarrow Bay.</p> <p>The house was especially attractive, Rombakh said, because of its single level and location close to hundreds of trails and Bellevue's Spring District, where Amazon and Meta are expanding. It sold for \$3.63 million.</p> <p>"One anomaly like this ... doesn't determine the market," he said.</p> <p>But the sale is one extreme example of a factor that has become routine for local homebuyers — and not just on the expensive Eastside.</p> <p>On average last month, single-family homes in King County sold for 7.3% more than the list price, according to data released Monday by the Northwest Multiple Listing Service. On the median home price of \$775,000, that amounts to nearly \$56,600.</p> <p>In Snohomish, buyers paid 6.1% more than the list price. And counties from Pierce and Thurston to Kitsap and Jefferson averaged 2 to 3 percentage points over the list price.</p> <p>Those figures illustrate the challenge facing homebuyers even during typically slower winter months.</p> <p>"The biggest factor is there's just no inventory," said Zach Entwistle, a Keller Williams broker based in University Place who last week worked with a client who won a bidding war for a Lacey rambler listed at \$485,000, agreeing to pay \$519,000.</p> <p>January did bring some welcome news for homebuyers struggling to get into the market.</p> <p>Home prices, mostly reflecting sales that took place in December, were roughly flat across the region.</p> <p>In Snohomish County, the \$715,000 median was up about 2%; in Pierce County, the \$525,000 median was up 1%, according to new data released Monday by the Northwest Multiple Listing Service. In Kitsap, the \$508,750 median was up about 2%.</p> <p>King County saw a more significant dip. The median price of \$775,000 was down 4% from December. In Seattle, the median home price of \$790,000 dropped about 6% from December to January and is flat compared to last year at this time.</p> <p>January also brought new listings of homes for sale, after two months of falling inventory.</p>

But in most areas across Western Washington, prices are up from January 2021, and there are still fewer homes for sale than at this time in the past few years. The NWMLS estimates it would take less than two weeks to sell all the homes on the market given current buyer demand in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties.

Late last year, “the market cooled off. It leveled off. You saw buyers getting into homes at reasonable prices,” said Nick Casanova, an agent at a Tacoma Windermere office. “Unfortunately, it would seem as though that window of opportunity is closing — if not, it has closed.”

In that tight market, buyers have become accustomed to bidding up, even in the winter months.

In the Seattle metro area, homes sold for around 4% above the list price in November and December, about the same as during the peak spring market in 2018, according to Redfin.

Some sellers’ agents may deliberately price low to generate a bidding war, but that approach has its downsides.

Wading through dozens of offers can be a time suck, and a low price can draw a flood of buyers who fill up all the available viewing times for a house, locking others out from even seeing it.

“Somebody might be willing to pay a lot more, but if they can’t actually get in, what’s the point?” Entwistle said.

There are downsides for buyers, too.

Those relying on a mortgage need an appraiser to agree the home is worth what they’ve agreed to pay. As part of that process, appraisers will look at other recent sales, along with other information, to determine the value of the house.

If the appraisal doesn’t meet what the buyer has agreed to pay, the deal can fall through. To be more attractive to a seller, some buyers sweeten their offer by agreeing to cover at least some of the difference between an appraisal and their offer, exposing themselves to additional cost.

“Buyers have to be aware of it and be cautious,” Rombakh said.

As Melanie Pierce and her husband prepared an early offer on a four-bedroom home in Tacoma late last year, they knew what to expect. “We would have to submit something competitive over list price for them to be willing to take the first offer,” Pierce said.

“We wanted to put in an offer above the list price and still fair for the house and what we were getting.”

Their strategy worked. With an offer for 7% more than the list price, the couple secured the house and closed in December.

Other notable numbers from Monday’s home sales report:

- The number of new single-family home listings in King County jumped month-over-month for the first time since September, up 39%. However, the number of new listings was nearly 21% fewer than in January 2021 and down 16% from January 2019, before the pandemic.
- King County saw a big jump in condo listings from December to January, but those listings sold quickly. By the end of the month, the number of condos still listed for sale was fewer than in December or at this time last year.
- The number of pending sales climbed in January, compared with recent months. In King County, 11% more homes went pending in January than in December. In Snohomish County: 15%. In other nearby counties, the jump ranged from 2% to 8%. Even so, fewer pending sales took place than in January 2021 or January 2019, before the pandemic.

HEADLINE	02/06 Climate crisis: 1/3 rd in US face higher temps
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/05/americans-above-average-temperature-increase-climate-crisis
GIST	<p>More than a third of the American population is currently experiencing rapid, above-average rates of temperature increase, with 499 counties already breaching 1.5C (2.7F) of heating, a Guardian review of climate data shows.</p> <p>The US as a whole has heated up over the past century due to the release of planet-warming gases from burning fossil fuels, and swaths of the US west, north-east and upper midwest – representing more than 124.6 million people – have recorded soaring increases since federal government temperature records began in 1895.</p> <p>Though the climate crisis is convulsing the US, it is doing so unevenly. Hotspots of extreme warming have emerged in many of America’s largest cities, and places as diverse as California’s balmy coast to the previously frigid northern reaches of Minnesota, while other places, particularly in the south, have barely seen their temperatures budge.</p> <p>“The warming isn’t distributed evenly,” said Brian Brettschneider, an Alaska-based climate scientist who collated the county temperature data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa). “Many places have seen dramatic changes, but there are always some places below the average who will think, ‘It didn’t seem that warm to me.’ The impacts differ depending where you are.”</p> <p>Ventura county in California has heated up more than any other county in the contiguous US, according to the Noaa data, experiencing a 2.6C (4.75F) increase in total warming in the period from 1895 to 2021. Meanwhile, counties that include many of America’s largest cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Boston, have all seen their average temperatures rise far beyond the national average, which stands at about a 1C (1.8F) increase on pre-industrial times.</p> <p>Mark Jackson, a meteorologist at the National Weather Service based in Oxnard in Ventura county said the county’s temperature increase was “a remarkable number, it’s a scary number when you consider the pace we are looking at”. Jackson said the county had seen a large increase in heatwaves, including a spell above 37C (100F) last summer that “really stressed” the local community.</p> <p>Ventura county, which hugs the Californian coast north-west of Los Angeles, is known for a pleasant Mediterranean climate cooled slightly by the proximity of the ocean. But Jackson said that recent heatwaves have seen warm air flow down from mountains in the nearby Los Padres national forest to the coast, while the ocean itself is being roiled by escalating temperatures. “It’s been really remarkable to see it get that hot right up to the coast,” he said.</p> <p>California is in the grip of its most severe drought in 1,200 years and scientists say this is fueling the heat seen in many places in the state – Los Angeles has warmed by 2.3C (4.2F) since 1895, while Santa Barbara has jumped by 2.4C (4.38F) – by reducing moisture in soils, which then bake more quickly.</p> <p>Higher temperatures are also worsening the risk of wildfires in the state. “We lost everything,” said Tyler Suchman, founder of online marketing firm Tribal Core who in 2017 fled with his wife to escape a huge wildfire that razed their home in Ojai, in Ventura county. “It was harrowing. The winds were blowing like crazy and the hills lining the highway were all on fire, I had never seen anything like it.”</p> <p>Just 11 months later, a separate wildfire destroyed the couple’s next home, in Malibu, as their neighbor scooped up water from his hot tub in a desperate attempt to tackle the flames. “No one wants us to move next to them now,” Suchman said. “You can see how the area has changed over the 18 years since we moved to Ojai. It’s a beautiful place but regrettably we can’t live there now, the risk is too great.”</p>

Hotspots of above-average warming are found across the US. Grand county in Utah, a place of sprawling deserts, cliffs and plateaus, is the second fastest warming county in the lower 48 states, while every county in New Jersey, Massachusetts and Connecticut has warmed by more than 1.5C (2.7F) since 1895.

It's the more northern latitudes that have experienced the most extreme recent heat, however, with counties in Alaska making up all of the top six fastest warming places since 1970 (comparable temperature data for Alaska does not go back further than the 1920s). Alaska's North slope, situated within the [rapidly warming Arctic](#), has heated up by an enormous 3.7C (6.6F) in just the past 50 years.

"There really is a climate shift under way in Alaska, everyone can see things are different than they used to be and everyone is concerned about what the future here will look like," said Brettschneider, who added that even his teenage children had noticed the retreat of sea ice, an elongating fire season and a [dearth of cold days](#).

The warmth is also melting frozen soils, known as permafrost, causing buildings to subside and roads to buckle. "If you drive on the roads near Fairbanks you better have a strong stomach because it feels like you're riding a rollercoaster," said Katharine Hayhoe, a climate scientist at Texas Tech University and chief scientist at the Nature Conservancy.

Other locations traditionally used to severe cold have also seen sharp temperature increases. Roseau and Kittson counties, in northern Minnesota, are both in the top five fastest warming counties in the lower 48 states, with their warming driven by winters that have heated up by around 3.8C (7F) in the state since modern record keeping began.

Winters are warming more quickly than summers because more heat usually escapes the land during the colder months, but it is now being trapped by greenhouse gases. "Some might say 'well I like warmer winters' but people are noticing negative impacts, such as changes to the growing season and the loss of cultural practices such as cross-country skiing races," said Heidi Roop, a climate scientist at the University of Minnesota. "Even small temperature changes have big consequences."

Globally, governments set a goal in the 2015 Paris climate agreement to avoid a temperature rise of 1.5C (2.7F) above the pre-industrial era. Beyond this point, [scientists say](#), the world will face increasingly punishing heatwaves, storms, flooding and societal unrest.

While certain areas of the US have already passed 1.5C, the important metric is still the global average, Hayhoe said. "In some places a 2C increase is fine but 2.5C is when the wheels fall off the bus, some locations are OK with 5ft of sea level rise because of their elevation while others can't cope with 5 in because they are low-lying," she said. "Local vulnerability is very customized. What's relevant for communities is whether the world meets its targets or not, it's a collective target for the world."

That global threshold is in severe peril, with some forecasts [warning](#) that 1.5C (2.7F) could be breached within a decade without drastic cuts to carbon emissions. Communities will need to brace themselves for the consequences of this, according to Roop.

"The warming we are seeing is pushing at the bounds of lived human experience, of what we thought was possible," she said. "We are paying the costs for that and we need to prepare for the changes already set in motion, as well as to prevent further warming."

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HEADLINE	02/08 Chimpanzees treating wounds of others
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/08/chimpanzees-observed-treating-wounds-of-others-using-crushed-insects
GIST	For humans, the first instinct would be to disinfect it and then cover it with a bandage.

But chimpanzees have invented a more creative method: catching insects and applying them directly to the open wound.

Scientists observed this behaviour in chimpanzees in the west African nation of Gabon, noticing that the apes not only use insects to treat their own wounds, but also those of their peers.

The research, published Monday in the journal *Current Biology*, marks an important contribution to ongoing scientific debate about the ability of chimpanzees – and of animals in general – to selflessly help others.

“When you’re going to school and you read in your biology books about the amazing things that animals can do,” Simone Pika, a biologist at the University of Osnabruck in Germany and a co-author of the study, told AFP.

“I think it could really be something like that that will end up in those books.”

The project began in 2019, when an adult female chimpanzee named Suzee was observed inspecting a wound on the foot of her adolescent son.

Suzee then suddenly caught an insect out of the air, put it in her mouth, apparently squeezed it, and then applied it to her son’s wound.

After extracting the insect from the wound, she applied it two more times.

The scene unfolded in Loango national park on Gabon’s Atlantic coast, where researchers are studying a group of 45 central chimpanzees, an endangered species. Over the following 15 months, scientists saw chimpanzees administer the same treatment on themselves at least 19 times.

And on two other occasions they observed injured chimpanzees being treated in the same way by one or several fellow apes.

The wounds, sometimes several centimetres wide, can come from conflicts between members of same or an opposing group.

Far from protesting against the treatment, the bruised chimpanzees were happy to be tended to. “It takes lot of trust to put an insect in an open wound,” said Pika. “They seem to understand that if you do this to me with this insect, then my wound gets better. It’s amazing.”

Researchers have not been able to identify what bug was used on the wounds, but they believe it to be a flying insect given the chimpanzees’ rapid movement to catch it.

Pika says the insect could contain anti-inflammatory substances that have a soothing effect. Insects are known to have various medical properties and researches will need to conduct more work to detect and study the insect in question.

Birds, bears, elephants and other animals have already been observed self-medicating, for example by eating plants. But what is unique about chimpanzees is that they will treat not just themselves, but also help others.

Some scientists, however, still doubt the ability of animal species to exhibit prosocial behaviours, such as selflessly caring for others, Pika said.

But here the chimpanzees have nothing to gain, she said. So why do they do it? In humans, prosocial behaviour is generally linked to empathy, a hypothesis that is worth further study, said Pika.

HEADLINE	02/07 First 'atlas' world glaciers: dire warning
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/g5qwd9/first-atlas-of-world-glaciers-reveals-dire-warning-for-water-scarce-future?
GIST	<p>Earth's glaciers are melting as a result of human-driven climate change, a trend that has both local and global implications because glacial runoff provides freshwater to communities and ecosystems, while also contributing to sea level rise, which threatens coastal populations around the world.</p> <p>Now, scientists led by Romain Millan, a postdoctoral scholar at the Institute of Environmental Geosciences in Grenoble, France, have produced the first global atlas of glacial movement and thickness, which reveals that the world's glaciers have the potential to add an estimated 257 millimeters (10 inches) to sea level rise—roughly 20 percent less than previous estimates of about 13 inches.</p> <p>On the surface, this finding may sound like a rare piece of good news about rising sea levels, but Millan and his colleagues emphatically reject that characterization for a few reasons. Most importantly, the research raises alarms about freshwater availability in regions such as the tropical Andes Mountains, which contain 27 percent less glacial ice than previously calculated, according to the team's study, which was published on Monday in <i>Nature Geoscience</i>.</p> <p>"The takeaway message is that we find, overall, that there is less ice in glaciers and it's bad news in terms of freshwater resources for people around the world," Millan said in a call.</p> <p>The team built this robust map of world glaciers from more than 800,000 images of Earth from space taken between 2017 and 2018 by the European Space Agency's Sentinel-1 and Sentinel-2 satellites, and NASA's Landsat-8 satellite. This space-down view covers 98 percent of Earth's glaciers, some of which have never been mapped before, including regions in Caucasus, New Zealand, and islands located off the coast of Antarctica.</p> <p>The vast trove of data enabled the researchers to clock the velocity of glacial ice worldwide for the first time, adding a key missing piece of the puzzle compared to previous estimates of global glacial volume. The technique exposed some of the world's fastest flowing ice, such as Penguin Glacier in Patagonia, which is moving at more than seven miles per year.</p> <p>"Since 2013, there has been a revolution in satellite imagery," Millan explained. "For example, with Sentinel-2, you can get a picture of the same glacier every five days, which has completely changed the way we look at glaciers. This allows us to really do a systematic mapping of the ice velocity of all the glaciers."</p> <p>"We mapped the ice velocity at a resolution of 50 meters" which "allows us to look at fine details in glaciers that was not possible in the past," he added. "The ice velocity gives you a sense of where the ice is thin and where the ice is thick, and knowing that, we can re-estimate the volume of the world's glaciers."</p> <p>Overall, the results revealed that the world's glaciers contain 11 percent less ice compared to previous estimates, though these ice deficits were not evenly distributed across the globe. Some regions contain far more ice reserves than previously estimated; the glaciers of the Himalayas, for instance, hold 37 percent more ice than suggested by past studies.</p> <p>However, communities in North Asia, which the team estimates may have 35 percent less ice than previously estimated, as well as those located in parts of the Andes Mountains, may be much more vulnerable to freshwater depletion in the future than anticipated. This finding has implications for millions of people who need freshwater not only to drink, but for crop irrigation and hydropower, among other applications.</p> <p>The new atlas can also improve projections of sea level rise, a trend that has consequences for coastal communities around the world. However, Millan noted that the study only models glaciers around the world, as opposed to massive ice sheets like those located in Greenland and Antarctica, which will be the</p>

	<p>major driver of sea level rise over the long term. While the researchers found that glaciers may contribute three fewer inches to rising sea levels, the loss of those massive ice sheets would still swamp that glacial contribution by hundreds of feet.</p> <p>Millan and his colleagues said that their findings will need to be bolstered by field surveys of the world's glaciers, which will double-check the satellite observations from the ground. Even so, the study represents a quantum leap in our understanding of global glacier cover, with major implications for scientists in the field as well as policy-makers hoping to mitigate the effects of human-driven climate change.</p> <p>"This new geometry is more coherent in time, and captures the shape of the glaciers in a much better way, which changes everything for the future evolution of glaciers," Millan concluded.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	02/07 Sovereign citizens South Carolina attention
SOURCE	https://www.wspa.com/news/state-news/how-sovereign-citizen-extremism-may-have-captured-the-attention-of-sc-residents/
GIST	<p>CHARLESTON, S.C. (WCBD) – Police are still investigating after two people with ties to the “Sovereign Citizen Movement” were found dead Wednesday in an apartment.</p> <p>So-called “sovereign citizens” believe they are immune from government and should be able to decide for themselves which laws they want to obey and which ones they do not. In some cases, they have been known to violently confront police in pursuit of their ideologies.</p> <p>Who are “Sovereign Citizens” and what do they believe?</p> <p>The Sovereign Citizen Movement does not resemble a “traditional” cult as it lacks any centralized organizational structure but rather is a system of nationwide gurus and local leaders that develop individualized ideas of personal sovereignty and how it should be exercised.</p> <p>The FBI describes the Sovereign Citizen Movement as antigovernmental extremists “who believe that even though they physically reside in this country, they are separate or ‘sovereign’ from the United States.” As a result, they are known to avoid paying taxes, not carry a driver’s license, engage in frivolous legal action, and refuse to obey law enforcement and court orders.</p> <p>The contemporary belief system is rooted in racism, antisemitism, and conspiracy theories.</p> <p>According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, sovereign citizens believe that the American government set up by the founding fathers– called common law– was secretly replaced in the 1800s by an illegitimate government in favor of admiralty law– the law of the sea and international commerce. Sovereign Citizens believe that the US government has entered into contracts with foreign nations to effectively “sell their citizenry” and this is done through driver’s licenses, social security numbers, and other identity documents. So, they believe there are certain legal ways to divorce themselves from the government so they no longer have to obey what they believe is an illegitimate government.</p> <p>In addition, some followers believe that there is a secret-corporate trust set up by the US government in every newborn baby’s name and that “by filing a series of complex, legal-sounding documents, the sovereign can tap into that secret Treasury account for his own purposes,” according to the SPLC. The Internal Revenue Service calls the notion that secret accounts are assigned to each citizen “pure fantasy.”</p> <p>In essence, the Sovereign Citizen Movement instills in followers that all of their problems are a result on an illegitimate government and banking system and offers them a way out.</p>

A history of violence and “paper terrorism”

The FBI has designated the Sovereign Citizen Movement as a domestic terrorist threat as followers have been known to engage law enforcement in violent, deadly ways.

Some recent examples of violence include:

- In 2010, Jerry and Joseph Kane, a sovereign father and son killed two Arkansas police officers during a routine traffic stop.
- In 2016, Gavin Eugene Long, alleged to belong to one of the movements sub-groups, killed three law enforcement officers in an ambush in Louisiana.
- In 2018, Travis Reinking shot up a Waffle House in Tennessee, killing an employee and three patrons. Reinking later identified himself as a sovereign citizen in 2017 after being arrested for showing up at the White House and demanding to meet with President Trump.

But, while some followers of the sovereign movement have resorted to violence, the most widely-used tactic is called “paper terrorism.” The Department of Homeland Security describes paper terrorism as “clogging the courts with nonsensical, voluminous filings, phony lawsuits, and false liens against public officials as a form of harassment and intimidation.”

This tactic is utilized in the perpetration of white-collar crimes, such as money laundering, tax evasion, and housing-related schemes. For example, Mt. Pleasant dentist, Judy Villanyi, was previously sentenced to federal prison for tax fraud in connection to the movement

It is also often used as a retaliatory measure when a government official upsets a sovereign citizen. For example, a Nevada man countersued a Utah law firm for \$38 quadrillion (that’s 38 followed by 15 zeros) after the firm sued him for placing an unjustified lien against the property of one of its clients.

How big is the movement?

The Southern Poverty Law Center explains that there is no way to know exactly how many sovereign citizens there are in the United States today because of its lack of centralized leadership.

However, in 2010, the SPLC estimated that there were roughly 100,000 “hard-core believers” and another 200,000 “starting out by trying sovereign techniques,” for a total of 300,000 individuals.

The South Carolina connection

In December 2003, the Sovereign Citizen Movement took center stage in Abbeville, S.C. when members of the Bixby family engaged in a day-long gun battle with the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division. According to court documents, SCDOT officials were working on a project to expand SC-72 that required crossing the Bixbys’ property. The Bixbys did not believe that SCDOT had a right of way across their property and threatened violence to prevent construction. What resulted was a 12-hour standoff that left two public officials dead. Steven Bixby was found guilty of two counts of murder, sentenced to death, and as of 2021 remains on death row.

So how did a quiet Upstate town become the epicenter of extremism in South Carolina?

Even though the sovereign citizen movement is not well-known, its followers are abundant in the Upstate, particularly in Abbeville where people are drawn to the town but to “live among kindred spirits who despise the federal government every bit as strongly as their ancestors did in 1861.” Perhaps, this idea that Abbeville embodies the spirit of secession stems from its self-proclamation as the “birthplace and deathbed of the Confederacy.”

In 2004, the SPLC suggested there may be more anti-government extremists in the vicinity of Abbeville than anywhere else in the country.

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SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/07/prisons-lockdown-ending/
GIST	<p>The Federal Bureau of Prisons announced Monday that it was ending the nationwide lockdown of its facilities, gradually easing the restrictions at sites where officials determined there was no longer a threat.</p> <p>In a statement, the bureau said it had decided to “return select facilities to the appropriate modified operational status” as part of a “tiered response” that would lift restrictions elsewhere as officials decided it was safe to do so. An official familiar with the matter said about 30 facilities would come out of lockdown at first, though the number was expected to shift.</p> <p>The Bureau of Prisons had imposed the nationwide lockdown Jan. 31, after two inmates were killed in a gang fight in Texas and officials feared retaliatory violence in other facilities across the country. The dramatic step sparked some anger among inmates and their relatives, who felt it was overly broad. The Bureau of Prisons has about 134,000 inmates held in 122 facilities.</p> <p>A federal official familiar with the matter said because inmates affiliated with gangs, including MS-13, were involved in the altercation, and because those gangs are believed to have a presence in the vast majority of other U.S. prisons, authorities felt the extensive restriction was necessary. The official, like others in this report, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal Bureau of Prisons security discussions.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 China telecom indicted in theft scheme
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/7/hytera-chinese-telecom-firm-indicted-theft-motorol/
GIST	<p>A federal grand jury in Chicago has indicted the Chinese telecommunications firm Hytera Communications Co. Ltd. for conspiracy in a scheme to steal Motorola walkie-talkie secrets, the Justice Department announced Monday.</p> <p>Hytera has been linked by U.S. intelligence to Chinese police and intelligence services and is accused of the trade secrets theft of Motorola’s proprietary digital mobile radio technology.</p> <p>Spokesmen for Hytera did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the filing, which comes as the FBI says it is investigating a raft of cases involving Chinese theft of U.S. corporate intellectual property.</p> <p>In addition to Hytera, several former Motorola employees that were hired by Hytera were indicted. However, the names of the former employees were redacted in the indictment unsealed in U.S. District Court in Chicago.</p> <p>According to court documents, Hytera has been under investigation since 2019 and hired former Motorola employees as part of a plan to obtain the digital radio secrets.</p> <p>Police and emergency services were required to shift from analog radios to digital in 2004 by the Federal Communications Commission, prompting both Motorola and Hytera to develop digital radios.</p> <p>“At Hytera’s direction and for the benefit of Hytera and others, the individual defendants took proprietary and trade secret information from Motorola without authorization,” the indictment states.</p> <p>“Motorola’s proprietary and trade secret information was used by Hytera and the individual defendants to accelerate the development of Hytera’s [digital mobile radio] products. As a result, Hytera’s [digital mobile radio] products relied on and contained Motorola’s proprietary and trade secret information.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Judge: Air Force \$230M shooting settlement
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/us/air-force-sutherland-springs-shooting-settlement.html

GIST

A federal judge ordered the U.S. Air Force on Monday to pay more than \$230 million to the survivors and the families of the victims of a 2017 shooting at a Texas church because the Air Force had failed to report the gunman's criminal history.

In his [ruling](#), Judge Xavier Rodriguez of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas wrote that the Air Force could have blocked the gunman, Devin P. Kelley, who had served on an Air Force base in New Mexico, from buying the rifle he used to kill 26 people on Nov. 5, 2017, at the First Baptist Church in [Sutherland Springs](#), Texas.

For its failure to report Mr. Kelley's 2012 conviction for domestic assault, the Air Force must pay damages to the victims for their "pain and suffering, mental anguish, disfigurement, impairment and loss of companionship," the judge wrote. He added that the case was "unprecedented in kind and scope."

The ruling came in a lawsuit brought against the federal government by the families of the victims. "Ultimately, there is no satisfying way to determine the worth of these families' pain," the judge wrote.

In July, Judge Rodriguez ruled that the Air Force was "[60 percent responsible](#)" for the massacre.

Under federal law, Mr. Kelley should not have been allowed to buy the military-style rifle or the three other guns he acquired before the shooting. He purchased the weapons after he was convicted of domestic assault against his wife and stepson, whose skull he admitted to cracking.

Mr. Kelley received a "bad conduct" discharge from the Air Force in 2014 after almost five years of service.

After the shooting, [the Air Force acknowledged its error](#), saying that it should have [reported](#) Mr. Kelley's conviction to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. A conviction should have prevented him from buying guns.

The Air Force also said after the shooting that it was looking into whether other convictions had been improperly left unreported to a federal database for firearms background checks.

Jamal Alsaffar, one of the lawyers who represented the victims, said on Monday night that the families were relieved by the ruling.

"The judge recognizing there must be some accountability for the violence is really important for them," said Mr. Alsaffar, a lawyer for National Trial Law, a law firm in Austin.

On Monday night, Ann Stefanek, a spokeswoman for the Air Force, said that it planned to appeal the ruling. "We are aware of the court's award and are reviewing the judge's ruling," she said.

On Nov. 15, 2017, Mr. Kelley walked into a Sunday service at a small Baptist church and fired at the parishioners worshipping in the pews. The victims ranged in age from 5 to 72, and among the dead were a pregnant woman and the pastor's 14-year-old daughter.

A neighbor shot Mr. Kelley twice as he exited the church. Mr. Kelley jumped in his car and led the neighbor and another man in a car chase. The gunman crashed his car and was found dead behind the wheel, where officials said he had shot himself in the head.

In his 185-page ruling, Judge Rodriguez enumerated the damage that the shooting caused each victim and some of their family members, totaling around 80 people. The highest single award was \$7 million.

John Porter Holcombe, who survived the shooting but whose wife, stepchildren and parents were killed, was awarded more than \$4.6 million. His wife's estate was awarded \$7 million.

	“He has not forgotten the sight of his murdered wife surrounded by their dead children,” Judge Rodriguez wrote.
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HEADLINE	02/07 Businesses struggle in Seattle ‘Little Saigon’
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/businesses-struggle-seattles-little-saigon-priority-crime-clean-up-area/LEJHBACZ4ZBDRNJTJ5MOFXIYDY/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Gun violence rang out across Seattle over the weekend with shootings in Capitol Hill, Little Saigon and a murder in the Rainier Valley.</p> <p>One of the shootings Saturday happened at 12th Ave S and S Jackson St. Police say a bullet ricocheted off a sidewalk and hit a man in the leg.</p> <p>Businesses nearby say the shooting itself isn’t all that remarkable. However, the gun violence happened a day after Mayor Bruce Harrell announced 12th and Jackson as a priority area for police to crack down on crime.</p> <p>It’s an intersection that constantly has a throng of people milling about.</p> <p>“There will be 100 people over there at any time of the day,” said Eric Wheeler, who was repainting a business in the neighborhood Monday. “I’ve seen people come down here and they turn around and go the other way,” he said.</p> <p>“It’s a mess over there. It brings a lot of problems,” said Nick Bui, who owns Dong Thap Noodle, across the street from the troubled corner. “It’s a swap meet over there, it’s drug dealings, there are a lot of cases over there. There is just a lot of illegal activity,” Bui said.</p> <p>Harrell on Friday called the intersection an “area of concentrated crime” and said it’s one hot spot police are focusing on.</p> <p>“Our police officers in the first 21 days of January made 23 felony arrests, 14 misdemeanor arrests,” Harrell said during the Friday press conference.</p> <p>But multiple businesses in the area said they haven’t noticed any improvement.</p> <p>Sichuanese Cuisine, a restaurant kitty-corner to the intersection in question, said that the arrests have not quelled the crowd.</p> <p>“There’s been not much difference - it’s like this every day. Because the when the police come, they run. Then they come back immediately,” said Ke Wang of Sichuanese Cuisine restaurant, speaking in Mandarin Chinese.</p> <p>“Not at all. Of course Mayor Harrell has said he’ll make that a priority over there but we just have to wait out and see what will that lead to,” Bui said.</p> <p>However, Bui says the promised changes come too late to help his business – and that Dong Thap Noodles has no option but to leave the neighborhood. They plan to move to Tukwila’s Southcenter Mall by next year.</p> <p>“We are relocating for sure. We’re not staying around here. We’re not taking a chance. The staff – our staff and family members are working here as well and I can’t take that chance on compromising their safety,” Bui said. He added that they’ve been victims of crime so many times that their insurance will no longer provide them coverage.</p>

	Neither Seattle police nor Harrell's office could say on Monday how many of the 37 people arrested in January were still in custody.
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HEADLINE	02/07 Richland: shooting inside Fred Meyer store
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article258150383.html https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article258140518.html
GIST	<p>Susan Leckband of Benton City was in the shoe department of the Fred Meyer in Richland about 11 a.m. Monday when she heard three shots, a pause and then three or four more shots.</p> <p>She knew immediately that they were gunshots and they seemed very close, she said.</p> <p>"I don't think I have ever been that scared," she told the Tri-City Herald. "And I am old and have seen a lot"</p> <p>She immediately looked for somewhere to hide and crossed the aisle to huddle behind a clothing rack, she said.</p> <p>She saw the clerk at the checkout counter by the doorway run.</p> <p>Leckband kept peeking out, trying to figure out where the shooter was, but saw no one.</p> <p>About five or 10 minutes later she saw three people walk out the east entrance off Wellsian Way near the shoe department, one of them a man holding his hands in the air and another of them a man pushing a cart.</p> <p>She remained hidden until she heard a loud screeching sound and saw a man opening an emergency exit in the shoe department.</p> <p>She waited a little longer "then skittered my way over to the emergency door," she said.</p> <p>Out in the parking lot there were already about 20 police and emergency vehicles, she said.</p> <p>"I stood out in the parking lot and shook and cried," she said.</p> <p>As she waited until she felt steady enough to drive, she saw someone carried out of the store on a stretcher, said Leckband, who is the former chairwoman of the Hanford Advisory Board.</p> <p>One man was killed in the shooting and a Fred Meyer employee was in critical condition after being wounded.</p> <p>Police said they'd identified a suspect but were still searching for him Monday evening.</p> <hr/> <p>9:45 p.m.</p> <p>Richland police posted an update on Facebook officially identifying the Fred Meyer shooting suspect as Aaron Christopher Kelly, 39.</p> <p>He's wanted on a first-degree murder warrant in the death of 38-year-old Justin Krumbah.</p> <p>Police also said the surviving shooting victim, a Fred Meyer store employee, was still in critical condition at Kadlec Regional Medical Center.</p> <p>"This investigation remains an active, around-the-clock effort by our investigators," said the post.</p>

	<p>“The Richland Police Department continues to hold the victims and their families in our thoughts during this difficult time.”</p> <p>7:45 p.m. An Instacart shopper with a “positive can-do attitude” was identified online by friends and co-workers as the man killed Monday inside the Richland Fred Meyer.</p> <p>Justin Krumbah, 38, was one of two people shot by a gunman about 11 a.m.</p> <p>A GoFundMe fundraiser for funeral expenses was started just hours after the 11 a.m. shooting to raise money for Krumbah’s funeral.</p> <p>By evening, 140 people already had donated \$6,000.</p> <p>7:10 p.m. A \$1 million nationwide warrant has been issued for the 39-year-old suspect in Monday morning’s deadly shooting at Fred Meyer.</p> <p>Aaron Christopher Kelly is charged in Benton County Superior Court with premeditated first-degree murder, online court records show.</p> <p>The warrant was signed Monday by Judge Dave Petersen, who found probable cause for Kelly’s arrest.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 DHS worker threatened couple: fake letter
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/man-who-was-dhs-employee-threatened-french-couple-fake-government-letter/
GIST	<p>Washington — A Virginia man admitted that while he was employed by the Department of Homeland Security, he and his wife wrote a letter on fake State Department letterhead and impersonated an official in order to threaten a French couple who had employed their daughter as an au pair in Southern France.</p> <p>In court on Monday, Ralph Karau pleaded guilty to one count of Misuse of Names, Words, Emblems, or Insignia — a law that makes it illegal to fraudulently use official U.S. government symbols "for the purpose of conveying the false impression that such communication is from a department," according to court documents.</p> <p>According to records filed with the plea agreement, in October of 2019, Karau and his wife, Kathleen, prepared the letter soon after their daughter had returned to the U.S. from her stint as an au pair, and a forensic investigation showed that Karau had worked on the letter on devices issued to him by the government.</p> <p>"The defendant's daughter alleged that she was mistreated by the Madiot family," court documents explained, without detailing the allegations of mistreatment.</p> <p>"After hearing of these complaints from their daughter, the defendant and his wife together created a fraudulent letter to send to the Madiots," the filing said.</p> <p>The counterfeit correspondence falsely informed the French couple that a "formal complaint" had been filed against them with the State Department for their alleged mistreatment, and it warned that they could be denied entry into the U.S. because of the claim.</p> <p>Further, "[t]he letter implied that a 'financial settlement' paid to the Karau's daughter would be in the best interest of the Madiots," the filings reveal.</p>

The Karaus invented a State Department official, "Karl Wilkinson, Deputy Chief, International Investigations Unit" and used the official seal of the State Department to give the letter an air of legitimacy.

Karau, who at the time worked as a senior adviser to the director of real property at DHS, also admitted he had sent the letter through a post office in Washington, D.C., so that it would be postmarked in the nation's capital, according to the Statement of Offense filed in the case.

Because of his employment at DHS, Karau had a top-secret security clearance, the court records also noted.

CBS News has reached out to DHS for comment on the case and clarification about Karau's employment status at the department.

Upon their receipt of the note, the French couple was described as "deeply concerned for any legal or other consequences they might face," and contacted the French Embassy in Washington, D.C., which brought the issue to the U.S. Embassy in Paris.

A spokesperson for the U.S. State Department referred CBS News to the U.S. attorney's office in Washington, D.C., which prosecuted the case. Court records filed by the prosecutors explained, "The U.S. Department of State did not know of this fraudulent letter and did not authorize its drafting or the use of its official seal in the letter."

The issue was ultimately referred to U.S. law enforcement, resulting in charges against the Karaus.

Kathleen Karau entered into a Deferred Prosecution Agreement with the government, in which she accepted responsibility for her conduct without being formally convicted. Her attorneys declined to comment on this story.

Ralph Karau now faces a maximum sentence of one year in prison and a \$100,000 fine. His legal team did not immediately return CBS News' request for comment.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Suspect Richland shooting caught
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/washington-richland-shooting-fred-meyer-at-least-1-dead/
GIST	<p>At least one person was killed and another wounded in a shooting at a Fred Meyer grocery store in Richland, Washington Monday afternoon, police said. The suspect was captured hours later on an interstate northeast of Richland.</p> <p>Officers responded at 11:04 a.m. local time after receiving reports that shots had been fired, Richland Police Commander Chris Lee said at a news conference. He said the gunman and slain victim had some sort of interaction before the shooting, but police were unaware of the content of the exchange.</p> <p>Local schools were placed on non-critical lockdown during the police response.</p> <p>A spokesperson for Kroger, the parent company of Fred Meyer, said the company is "deeply saddened by the incident."</p> <p>"The entire Fred Meyer family offers our thoughts, prayers, and support to all affected individuals and families during this difficult time," the spokesperson said.</p> <p>Suspect caught, on interstate</p> <p>The alleged gunman was apprehended without incident on Interstate 90 between Sprague, Washington and Spokane, northeast of Richland, police in Richland said late Monday night.</p>

	<p>They said Aaron Christopher Kelly, 39, was to be brought back to the Richland area and booked on charges of first degree murder and first degree attempted murder.</p> <p>They identified the slain victim as 38-year-old Justin Krumbah and said the wounded victim was in critical condition.</p> <p>The Tri-City Herald reported that Krumbah was a customer at the store and the other victim is an employee.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/07 Ex-Honduras leader US corrupt officials list
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sources-honduran-leader-us-list-corrupt-officials-82728892
GIST	<p>MIAMI -- The Biden administration last year quietly placed former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández on a classified list of officials suspected of corruption or undermining democracy in Central America, according to the State Department, which made the designation public Monday.</p> <p>The list was provided last summer to the U.S. Congress in compliance with legislation pushed by former Congressman Eliot Engel, who chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee before being defeated in a Democratic primary in 2020.</p> <p>The publication of the so-called Engel List fell like a bombshell in Central America, containing the names of another former Honduran president, Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo Sosa, among more than 50 active lawmakers, top politicians and former officials in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — the so-called “Northern Triangle” countries.</p> <p>But one notable omission was Hernández, who was in power at the time but reeling from accusations that surfaced in the drug trafficking trial of his brother, ex lawmaker Antonio “Tony” Hernández, that his political ascent had been funded by bribes from drug traffickers. Tony Hernández was sentenced in New York in March to life in prison.</p> <p>Individuals on the list are generally ineligible for visas and admission to the U.S.</p> <p>“The United States’ commitment to fighting corruption and promoting democracy, rule of law, and accountability in support of the people of Central America is ironclad,” the State Department said in a statement, citing “multiple, credible media reports” that Hernández had engaged in significant acts of corruption by taking payments from drug traffickers.</p> <p>With Hernández's stepping down last month, the State Department considered it was no longer necessary to maintain secrecy, two people familiar with the sanction said on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations.</p> <p>Pressure has been building in Washington to go after Hernández as his successor, Xiomara Castro, seeks to improve relations with the U.S.</p> <p>Sen. Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, this month called on the Biden administration to designate Hernández a “significant foreign narcotics trafficker” under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, making it illegal for U.S. companies and individuals to do business with him. His comments followed a letter sent to Attorney General Merrick Garland by Rep. Norma Torres, a California Democrat who co-chairs the Central America caucus in Congress, calling for the U.S. Justice Department to indict Hernández.</p> <p>“Hernández has been a central figure in undermining the rule of law in his own country and in protecting and assisting drug traffickers to move their materials through Honduras and to the United States,” Torres said at the time. “He has been repeatedly identified as a co-conspirator in other drug trafficking cases and</p>

has caused incredible pain to both the people of Honduras and the United States. I believe it is essential that the United States hold him accountable for his criminal behavior."

Hernández has likened prosecutors' attention to a witch hunt fueled by the false testimony of confessed killers who were also key witnesses in his brother's trial.

In a statement Monday, he touted his record for pursuing drug cartels, which he said had the support of the Drug Enforcement Administration among other federal agencies, and questioned why the designation was based on media reports.

He cited U.S. government reports showing that the flow of drugs through Honduras fell sharply since he took power and that under his rule 59 drug traffickers were either extradited or surrendered to U.S. authorities.

"These drug traffickers and confessed assassins used to fully dominate the country, but since my arrival to congress in 2010 and later as president since 2014 my government took decisions and executed actions that reduced considerably the flow of drugs that reached the U.S.," he said.

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HEADLINE	02/07 Scrutiny: Minnesota no-knock warrants
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/minneapolis-city-council-review-knock-warrants-amir-locke/story?id=82722564
GIST	<p>A Minneapolis city council committee held a hearing on no-knock warrants Monday afternoon following the death of Amir Locke, who was fatally shot in an apartment by Minneapolis police officers on Wednesday during the execution of a no-knock warrant.</p> <p>Law enforcement and criminal justice experts as well as activists and attorneys for the Locke family offered research and perspective on the impact and harm of no-knock warrants to the city council as talks of legislation continue.</p> <p>A no-knock warrant allows the police to enter someone's home without knocking, sometimes without announcing their presence, attorney and criminal justice professor Rachel Moran said at the hearing.</p> <p>If authorized by a judge, officers are also allowed to enter at a time period that's not within the 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. window to which normal search warrants are typically limited.</p> <p>Moran cited a New York Times investigation that found at least 81 civilians and 13 law enforcement officers have died in no-knock and quick-knock raids between 2010 and 2016 in the U.S. -- and many more have been seriously injured.</p> <p>"They're dangerous for residents and for the police," Moran said.</p> <p>Civil rights attorney Ben Crump, attorney Antonio Romanucci and attorney Jeff Storms, who are representing Locke's family members, slammed local legislators for policies that Storms called "half measures."</p> <p>"This is an epic failure of policy, and that failed policy killed Amir Locke," Crump said.</p> <p>Romanucci added that no-knock warrants are "one of the most intrusive forms of government that our communities can experience, period. They can result in needless death and psychological trauma."</p> <p>Moran, Crump and Storms said that policy changes on no-knock warrants haven't made a significant impact.</p> <p>Minneapolis Police Department updated its policy in November 2020, limiting no-knock warrants to "exigent" cases.</p>

Minneapolis police officers are required to announce their presence and purpose before entering a home, except for when announcing the officers' presence would create an imminent threat.

In those cases, a supervisor can authorize officers to enter without announcing their presence. Supervisors are required to provide evidence to support that decision before it is signed and approved by the judge.

"This is about proactive policymaking and instilling accountability," Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey said in a statement announcing the policy last November. "We can't prevent every tragedy, but we can limit the likelihood of bad outcomes. This new, no-knock warrant policy will set shared expectations for our community and clear and objective standards within the department."

That month, Moran said, the city reported that they'd been averaging about 139 no-knock warrants per year. In the first 10 months after the purported ban, the city reported that it had requested 90 no-knock warrants, according to Moran.

"It's important to implore upon everyone, that half measures have really gotten cities nowhere across the country," Storms said. "It's important that city does not just put Band-Aids on the immediate problems but spends time thinking about how to preempt the next civil rights violation, not just related to no-knock warrants, but to other areas of policy practice and training."

In response to Locke's death, Frey issued a moratorium late Friday on no-knock warrants.

"No matter what information comes to light, it won't change the fact that Amir Locke's life was cut short," Frey said [in a statement](#). "To ensure safety of both the public and officers until a new policy is crafted, I'm issuing a moratorium on both the request and execution of such warrants in Minneapolis."

However, officials may execute a no-knock warrant under the moratorium if it is determined that there is an imminent threat of harm to an individual or the public. The chief must approve the warrant in those cases, according to the mayor.

Frey will talk with the experts who helped shape Breonna's Law to review and suggest revisions to the department's policy. The law, issued in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2020, banned no-knock warrants following the fatal shooting of Breonna Taylor.

In a Friday press conference regarding Locke's death, [acting Minneapolis Police Chief Amelia Huffman](#) said that "both a no-knock and a knock search warrant were obtained ... so that the SWAT team could assess the circumstances and make the best possible decision" in the Locke case.

Body camera footage released Thursday shows officers executing a [no-knock search warrant](#) before coming across 22-year-old Locke, who had been sleeping under a blanket on the couch in the apartment that the warrant was issued for.

He is seen holding a gun as he begins to sit up, still covered with the blanket before he is shot less than 10 seconds after officers entered the room.

Huffman said that when officers saw the gun, "That's the moment when the officer had to make a split second decision to assess the circumstances and determine whether he felt like there was an articulable threat."

Locke was not named in the no-knock warrant, according to family attorney Ben Crump said at the press conference. The warrant was being executed on behalf of St. Paul police, who were searching for a homicide suspect.

The Hennepin County Medical Examiner has ruled Locke's death a homicide.

	<p>The officer who shot and killed Locke was identified by police as Mark Hanneman. In accordance with policy, he's been placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation into the incident. It is unclear if Hanneman has legal representation.</p> <p>Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison will work with the Hennepin County Attorney's Office to review Locke's death, the office said in a press release Friday.</p> <p>Locke's killing prompted protests demanding justice in his killing. Hundreds of demonstrators chanted, "Who's down with the revolution? We're down with the revolution!" and "No justice, no peace," while marching toward the police precinct on Saturday.</p> <p>A caravan of cars also pulled up to what ABC affiliate KSTP reported could be Huffman's home. Protesters got out of their cars in front of the home, chanting and banging drums.</p>
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